Children of Lilith Series Book One
Ascend
L.M. Gose

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Children of Lilith Series

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Dedicated to:

my brother and sisters by blood and those by love

Prologue

Before there was anything, there were two Deities; a God and a Goddess. They existed in the universe together, yet alone, creating planets and stars, building entire galaxies; within time, they became bored of their larger creations and began to create life. First the creatures were created, on this planet and that planet; animals, insects, birds, dinosaurs, anything they could think of that amused their magnificent minds. Scattering life across the galaxies they had made, the two Deities came together to bring something new, something different, something more evolved into existence… and so they designed humanity.

Together, the God and Goddess shaped a new star system, with new planets, just for their new creation. They spent time filling it with the best of their works from across their universe, producing a tapestry of planets and moons. Together, the God and the Goddess chose their finest animal species to inhabit the third world in their new system. The Goddess formed the fauna that lived on the land and under the sea. The God built the mountains and the rivers. The Goddess and the God smiled as they looked upon their world and, feeling it was ready, picked the most beautiful part of the planet, a lovely clearing filled with fruit-bearing trees, flowers and a gentle flowing river in the deepest heart of the thickest forest for their new project. Then, together, they created mankind.

The God spawned the First Man, a strong, tall, dark-skinned being he called Adam. As he imagined Adam, so he willed Adam into reality. The Goddess thought it was delightful for a first of the species, but she thought her creation should be special and so she created the First Woman, with fiery red hair, brilliant green eyes, flawless fair skin and rosy lips. As she imagined her, she willed her into being and called her Lilith. Unbeknownst to God, the Goddess had whispered into her creation the ability to manipulate the world around her, thereby creating not only the first woman, but the First Witch.

For a time, Lilith and Adam lived in peace and love. Exploring the world made just for them, they found joy and happiness. To understand their new species, The God composed rules for Adam, insisting that he not kill the other creatures and not eat from one fruit-bearing tree, but the Goddess had given Lilith no such restriction. The Goddess had given the First Woman the ability to produce magic and enjoyed watching Lilith learn to cast simple spells when she was in private. The Goddess smiled upon her and felt the love of a mother for her daughter. The God felt no such attachment.

Instead, the God saw potential in his construct, and with a need to control, The God commanded Adam to do his bidding. Adam served his God, praying and worshipping his God. Adam tried to command Lilith to worship his Creator too, but, like most independent young women, she refused to submit. Instead she focused on the other creatures around her, befriending the animals in the world that flourished around her. The First Man became angry at her, for ignoring him, for refusing to submit and he complained to the God that made him. The God began to watch the First Woman and, when He saw her using magic, the God grew angry with the Goddess for keeping secrets from him, casting Lilith from the magnificent garden the deities had created together.

The Goddess, in an effort to protect Lilith from the God's wrath, hid her far from Adam and the God. She wrapped her creation in a protective cloaking spell and whispered the secret to magic into Lilith's mind as she slept. Not long after she was ejected from the Garden that would later become known as Eden, Lilith found she was with child. The Goddess, seeking to protect her, blessed her pregnancy with the same gifts she'd bestowed unto the mother, whispering magic into their souls. Some time

later, Lilith gave birth to Aya and Baan, the First Daughter and the First Son. The Goddess created other beings but withheld her gifts of magic from them, reserving that for the bloodline of the First Woman.

During this time, the God had created Eve from Adam's Rib, shaping her like the First Woman and willing her to life. She would submit to Adam and worship the God. In time, the Goddess and her humans were forgotten, ignored by the God and erased from the history of Men. Later, religions would be created, wars waged and millions slaughtered to appease the God's need to be worshiped.

For many centuries, Lilith, her children, their children and all the other children of the Goddess lived in relative peace, on the other side of what seemed so long ago to be a very large world. The Goddess watched happily as her children lived naturally, in tune with the earth magic around them, finding love with her other creations and creating more children, then more and more. Thousands of years passed, during which time some of the Goddess's Children had created civilizations of wonder and awe, while others lived simply, happily, two large landmasses filled with the Goddess's creations and She was happy too.

Sadly, all things do not last forever and the Children of God came to the beautiful, undisturbed, peaceful lands of Lilith's descendants. First in small groups, some from the west and some from the east. The Goddess's Children fought off these incursions for a time. Eventually, there came a man claiming to have discovered a rich bounty for their taking and he brought others with him. The Children of God slaughtered and enslaved the Goddess's people, destroying their homes and stealing their lands. The Goddess tried to save Her people but the God stopped her, having grown powerful through the worship of His followers. She was no match as She had never demanded to be revered. Helplessly, the Goddess watched as her lands were pillaged, raped and destroyed by the Children of God. Lilith, the First Witch and an immortal being, hid away, escaping towards the isolated mountains where no man dare go.

Lilith's children, however, had long ago altered their fate. Aya had realized her mortality and became a creature of darkness. Having cursed herself while attempting to prolong her life, she was now forced to live off the blood of others to survive. She sought to find her children and give them her resistance to aging, turning only those who consented into the first

Vampires, birthing a new species. Baan, a natural immortal, had many children with many women, although he did not parent them, feeling that they were beneath his immortality. One day, one of those sons, long angry with Baan for the abandonment, sought him out and, accompanied by a coven of powerful witches descended from his line, came with large wolves and attacked him on a Full Moon, hoping to strip him of his immorality. In desperation, Baan took on wolf form to fight the attackers, becoming stronger and larger than the natural wolves. He won the night but later learned that any male descendants who came after were cursed by the bloodline, forced to turn into wolves every full moon. Only his daughters retained access to their hereditary magic. The remaining witches and warlocks, having realized the danger the Children of God brought to their lands, hid themselves under protective spells, secreting their magic away and hiding in plain sight as one of the Children of God.

Wars raged on the Goddess's lands, the Creatures of Night were hunted by the Children of God, killed or worse and so eventually, when the Creatures of Night vanished from their known world, the Children of God felt they'd won. The truth of it was, however, that the Children of the Goddess, the witches and warlocks, the vampires and werewolves, still existed in the shadows and in the night. Hiding, biding their time, until it would be safe to return to the light of day.

Chapter One

“Friday mornings are the worst to find motivation,” Xavier complained to his twin sister, Arya, “I just don’t understand why we can’t have a four day week. All I have on Fridays are PE and study hall.”

She rolled her emerald eyes at her twin, tucking a wild strand of fiery red hair behind her ear. “And English and Science.”

Although they were twins, neither looked remotely like the other. Xavier had dark hair, dark eyes, a strong nose and jawline covered in bronzed olive skin. He was taller than her too, by over a foot, standing tall at six foot four.

“Yea, but why do those matter?” he laughed, glancing at his phone. As he stood up, a car honked their horn and Xavier groaned. “He just texted. He’s gotta give me a second. Gotta go, Sis.” Grabbing his bag, Xavier ran out the door, leaving Arya at the table alone with her bowl of fruit.

“Clean up your plate,” she called to no one, since he was already gone. Shaking her head, she scrolled through her phone as she ate her breakfast. It was the usual Twitter and Facebook scandals, which she pretty much ignored. Instead she loved looking at photos of horses on Instagram, which she dreamed she’d one day have. The twins had both had riding lessons when they were younger, and she’d fallen in love with all things equine.

“Good morning, Sweetie,” Arya’s mom said walking into the kitchen. Arya looked much like her mother, with the same bright red hair and brilliant green eyes, fair skin. In fact, if you asked most people, they were identical, only separated by the years on their faces. It was almost like Arya’s mom had cloned her. Apparently their grandmother and great-grandmother also all had strong resemblances to Arya, but those photos had been lost in a fire long ago, much to Arya’s disappointment and her mother’s sadness.

Arya smiled. Her mother was her best friend and they didn’t get to spend that much time together. “Morning, Mom! How was surgery last night?”

“Oh, you know, I put someone back together and he lived.” Arya’s mother was a General surgeon at Peak Memorial Hospital and she was one of the best. People often sought her out because her survival rates were some of the highest in the nation, something Arya admired so much about her mother. “Where’s Xavy?”

“I think Brian picked him up. Or Luke. One of them,” she replied. Brian Cho and Luke Matthews were Xavier’s best friends. Both boys had their licenses and were about a year older than the twins, who were only turning sixteen on the weekend. “Whichever one honks before they send a text.”

“Oh, drat. I was hoping to talk to him before he left… Well, tell him I’ll pick you both up this afternoon. There’s something we have to talk about and I need you together.” Her mom carefully avoided eye contact while pouring herself a cup of coffee. Arya studied her mother’s tight expression and instantly, a wave of anxiety washed over her. Something was up.

“What’s going on, Mom?” Her mother just shook her head.

“It’s not bad, I promise, but I need to talk to you both. Together.” She sighed heavily, glancing at the clock. “I’ll get dressed and then we’ll leave. I’ll drop you off at the corner by the school on my way.”

Arya nodded, watching her mother’s retreating back as she left the room.

After an unusual, uncomfortably silent car ride, Arya waved bye to her mother and began a brisk walk to school. As she neared the building, she saw her own best friend, Latoya, the smartest girl in school. They ran to

each other and hugged. Latoya's umber skin was nearly black as midnight and her eyes were deep pools of obsidian, which made Arya think of her friend as a living breathing representation of an African Queen. Today she was wearing a bright lavender sweater and jeans, which somehow made her skin look more radiant. Her tightly coiled curls cascaded naturally, falling, somehow, in a perfect mess that made her seem like she wasn't trying too hard but was still stunning. Her full lips were painted with lavender lipstick and her shimmering eyeshadow brightened the pink undertones in her skin. The sunlight hit her hair, highlighting her crown with undertones of red and blonde, enhancing her features, her smile becoming brighter.

"Oh my gosh, your birthday is tomorrow!!! Are you excited?" Latoya hooked Arya's arm in hers as they walked into the high school, passing boys who turned to stare at Latoya. She was easily the prettiest girl in school and everyone knew it.

"I mean, yea, I guess."

They walked together down the hall where their lockers stood side by side. Latoya Hernandez and Arya Herstory had been cubby mates long before they were old enough for lockers, thanks to their names, but the truth is they'd been friends since Latoya's mother and Arya's mother had been in medical school, pregnant together. They'd helped each other build their lives as best friends, which resulted in their daughters forming a lifelong bond.

Arya sighed. "But it kind of just reminds me that my father is still not in my life. And, after sixteen years, I still don't know who he is."

Latoya's dark brown eyes filled with sympathy and she made a soothing sound rather than reply. They'd been friends long enough that words weren't needed. Unlike Latoya, whose parents were still married, Arya had grown up with a single mom and a twin brother, but no father. Not even Latoya's mother knew who their father was. Arya knew this because Latoya had asked one night, after her mother had a few too many drinks. They'd had a heart to heart when Latoya's mom drank and became her typical sappy, lovely self.

"I guess I just want to know. That's all I want for my sixteenth birthday, It's my birthday wish," Arya continued, closing her locker. "But anyways, your birthday is two weeks away… what do you want?"

Her friend laughed as Arya's usual optimism took over. "I'm thinking a car, got the cash for one?" Latoya closed her locker and followed Arya to homeroom.

"No but I'm sure your Dad will get his princess anything she wants," Arya said, hiding the jealousy from her voice. Latoya had a strong bond with her father, Tyrone Hernandez, a world renowned cardiothorasic surgeon at Peak Memorial. Tyrone had always been very welcoming to the twins, treating them as extensions of his own family. Arya just smiled and shook her head. "I know what Xavier wants…" she said, teasingly.

Latoya rolled her eyes, laughing. "Girl, you know that boy ain't got nothing I want."

The teacher side-eyed them as they took their seats, giggling. As their teacher took attendance, Arya and Latoya whispered back and forth about their upcoming birthdays and what imaginary silly thing they wanted. By the end of homeroom, they'd decided they wanted magic powers and unicorns for pets.

Xavier, who'd been listening, laughed at them. "You're so friggin weird, Yas," as he referred to Arya and Latoya when they were together. Latoya rolled her eyes at him again.

"Oh, Xavy, Mom says she's picking us up at 3. Don't forget…" Arya paused before adding, "apparently, she has some news."

Xavier's eyes clouded with worry. The last time their mother had news, she'd been about to marry Glenn, a fellow doctor at Peak Memorial, also known as the worst person on the planet. Xavier had nearly gone to Juvy defending Arya from him, seriously hurting Glenn and putting him into the hospital for months. Arya shuddered at the memory. It was just lucky their mother was a respected doctor and that she'd been able to afford a good attorney.

"I don't think it's like that, Xavy…" she whispered to her twin.

His face remained neutral, but his eyes were still filled with worry. "Yea, okay, whatever," he said in a cold voice. He walked out the door, calling over his shoulder, "I'll see you at 3."

Arya stared after him for a moment before Latoya grabbed her arm, pulling her towards their first class, which, like most things, the girls shared.

The rest of the day passed normally. Xavier was nowhere to be seen, which wasn't unusual on Fridays, but Arya, who was trying to graduate early, had all of her AP classes on Fridays. In every class her teachers and classmates wished her a happy sixteenth birthday, asking her what her weekend plans were. Although the twins had planned nothing, Latoya had overridden their requests and was holding a party for twins at the local diner the next night. Everyone had agreed to come, which overwhelmed the redheaded wallflower, but she looked forward to it secretly.

At the end of the day, Xavier emerged from wherever he'd been hiding and met Arya at the same corner she'd been dropped that morning. He still seemed very worried about whatever it was their mother had to talk to him about and merely grunted hello at his sister. She tried not to worry about her twin or her mother's news, choosing to read a book about Odin and the other Norse Gods. Arya was always interested in mythology and had read nearly every religious text, studied nearly every form of paganism and wondered at the magic the stories told, wishing they were real. Lost in her pages, she didn't notice her brother shifting impatiently or the time passing quickly from when their mother agreed to pick them up.

"Where is she, Ya?" Xavier broke her focus, looking angrily at his phone. "I texted her three times and she hasn't responded. She won't pick up. She said she had to talk to us…"

"I don't know, Xavy," Arya replied softly. "Maybe she got pulled into an emergency surgery and forgot to let us know before she scrubbed in…. you know how trauma is." This placated her brother momentarily. His muscles relaxed, and his face lost its angry expression. "I'm sure she's fine. Let's meet her at home. I'm hungry anyways…" Her voice trailed off as he started walking.

"No, I texted her that we're going to Uncle Chewy's," Xavier called back to her. Picking up her bag, she ran after him.

★ ★ ★

Chewy's was a hole-in-the-wall diner with those really old vinyl booths where the vinyl had cracked and covered with duct tape. Most of the furniture was old and had been fixed several times over, but, according to the Herstorys, the food was the best in town. Uncle Chewy, as the twins

called the owner, was an older man in his sixties with dark mahogany skin, white hair and friendly brown eyes surrounded by laugh lines that made his face seem friendlier. The twins' mother had been taking them to Chewy's Diner since she'd first had a craving for chili fries and wandered in. They almost never went anywhere else.

The bell at the door rang as Xavier held the door for Arya and walked in behind her. Chewy was standing at the counter, pouring a coffee for a stranger, which was absolutely typical for a Friday afternoon. They lived in a town just off the interstate and people were always passing through.

Chewy smiled when he saw the kids, beckoning them to their usual spots at the counter, just a few seats from the stranger. "How're my kiddos today?"

His voice was deep and rhythmic, no matter what he said. Their mother once told them he'd been a mildly successful Blues singer from Beale Street in Memphis when he decided that wasn't his life anymore. He came to Peak's Village and opened his diner, using the money he'd made from his first and only record.

"Have you seen our Mom?" Xavier asked, ignoring the question, sitting down and turning over his coffee cup. Although their mother frowned upon it, Xavier insisted he drink coffee 'like a real man.' Chewy shook his head. "She was supposed to pick us up but she didn't. Now she won't answer my texts."

"She could be in surgery. You know she's a busy lady," he said, pouring the coffee into Xavier's cup. "Milkshake for you, my dear?" Chewy asked Arya, who answered with a smile.

"I'm calling Nancy," Xavier said, getting up and going outside to use his phone. Chewy's had a No Cell Phones sign since they'd been invented and he had thrown customers out for violating it, but if Xavier or Arya broke the rules, it was dish duty for them. Clearly, Xavier wasn't interested in that outcome.

"Well, how was your day, Sweetie Pie?"

Arya smiled at Chewy's nicknames, ever changing but ever endearing. "It was alright," she replied. "Just the normal high school experience, I guess."

Chewy nodded and glanced towards Xavier. "Brother is clearly in a bit of a mood. He doin alright?" Arya shrugged and pulled the menu out as if to

study it. “Hungry, Buttercup?”

Arya paused, reading the menu briefly before giving him her order. “Large fries, gravy on the side.”

“You are consistent.” After giving her order to the line cook, Maurice, Chewy turned to the stranger, drawing Arya’s attention to him for the first time. “Anything else?”

The stranger could have been a replica of her brother, older, more weathered but still the same face, same eyes, same dark olive skin, although his was covered in tattoos, strange symbols. Arya couldn’t help but stare. He was reading the paper in front of him, completely ignoring Chewy and Arya. Chewy walked into the back to make Arya’s milkshake but Arya was frozen. She was used to the resemblance to her own mother while her brother had always seemed the odd duck, so to speak, but this man, the resemblance… He felt dangerous, unsafe to her, no matter how he looked. As fear filled her, she let go of rational thought. She didn’t notice herself start to shake, her breathing become ragged or feel herself get up and back away to the door until she bumped into it. She barely recalled turning and opening the door to run out it. She didn’t see Xavier on the phone with Nancy and she didn’t remember how she got home. The stranger’s face, her brother’s face, older and scarred, never left her mind.

★ ★ ★

The door to their house slammed and her brother’s voice called out her name. By the time he was off the phone with Nancy, who confirmed their mother was in a surgery that could last a few more hours, he returned the diner to discover his sister gone. Chewy told Xavier that she’d just run out and he didn’t know why. She hadn’t said anything. Xavier didn’t notice the stranger, still reading the papers in front of him, before grabbing their food to go, and paying.Then he rushed home to find his sister.

“ARYA!!!!” He called again, opening the door of her room, where she was on the floor with her knees tucked to her chest. This wasn’t the first time, she’d gotten this way, panicked and afraid, but usually there was a reason, however unusual. After all, Arya saw things Xavier couldn’t explain, things he was unable to see. Sitting down next to her, his voice in a whisper, he asked “What happened? Why’d you run out of Chewy’s?” Arya

looked into the warmth of brother's dark eyes and placed her hand on his young, handsome face. Finally, she was calmed, though not entirely, enough to steady her breathing. She just shook her head, leaning into his body. There were some things she couldn't explain.

"I'm okay, I just had a panic attack. It's fine…" she said as normally as she could. "Did you find Mom?" She asked changing the subject, stretching her legs out in front of her to show she was okay.

Xavier swallowed his annoyance at her lie but allowed the change. "Yea, you were right. She's in surgery. Nancy said a couple hours, maybe more. Apparently she forgot to text one of us because she wasn't supposed to be on-call and I guess it was one of the other doctors that got hurt," Xavier explained, rocking his body side to side, causing his sister's to do the same.

"Do you know which one?" Arya asked.

"Nancy wouldn't say. She just asked if we were good for dinner," he answered. "I told her we were eating ice cream and sugar straight." His eyes sparkled with mischief. "She told me to stop being naughty."

Nancy was the oldest nurse in Colorado, possibly the country, at 87 years old. She was in charge of knowing the whereabouts of every doctor and nurse at all times, and her mind, sharp as ever, never failed. Xavier enjoyed teasing her, because, like most of their makeshift village, Nancy loved them as family and always bought them something special for their birthday, a small token like a grandmother would. Nancy didn't have any children, as she'd devoted her entire life to her community, from her profession as a nurse to her volunteer work with the church and local animal shelters. Everyone who knew Nancy loved her and she loved everyone too.

"I wonder if she's coming tomorrow," Arya said softly, pulling herself into a standing position. She'd decided not to tell her brother about the stranger, completely sure he'd think her crazy like he usually did when she said she saw things, even if he didn't say so. There was a reason she was the quiet one; she had secrets.

"I invited her. She said she'd stop by but wouldn't stay. You know her," he replied, his voice nearing a grunt as he stood.

"Thats nice. I really miss seeing her."

Before their 13th birthday, their mother had insisted they either spend every day after school at Latoya's or the hospital, if both of Latoya's parents were working. Nancy had spent a lot of time with them, from helping with homework to working out problems with bullies and friends. Arya loved Nancy and called her 'Nana' at Nancy's insistence, but Xavier never had such an affinity for Nancy, though he did like her a lot and trusted her with his own childhood secrets. Xavier nodded and lead the way downstairs, past the bookshelves overflowing with books that lined the hallway on both sides. "I'm sorry I ran out," Arya finally said. She didn't meet his eyes but her brother didn't ask her to explain or even acknowledge her apology.

"So I grabbed your fries and gravy, also Chewy threw in our usual chicken burgers with bacon and cheese. And your milkshake is in the freezer," Xavier dug through the brown paper bag for his food. "Want to watch something? I'm currently marathoning Game of Thrones."

"Again?" Arya raised her eyebrow at her brother in amusement. "You are constantly watching that show."

The two laughed and talked as they ate their dinner. When they finished, they cleared the table and went to the loft upstairs and put on a Marvel movie instead. After all, Arya reasoned, there's only so many times she can watch her namesake murder everyone. Xavier had rolled his eyes and agreed to the compromise as long as they started with Iron Man.

★ ★ ★

Hours later, the door to the Herstory house opened and closed, without a sound. After a long surgery, Dr. Lily Herstory was finally done. She'd managed to save her coworker after he'd been hit by an Ambulance in the ER bay. It had been a long, draining day and she still hadn't had the important talk with her kids and they needed to know by midnight of their sixteenth birthday. She still had time, but just barely.

Hearing the television upstairs, the exhausted woman put her bag down by the door and headed up. Walking into the loft, she saw her children sleeping peacefully. Her son was on the couch, his long legs hanging off the end as he was far too tall, while her daughter curled in a ball on the overstuffed chair. The TV was playing the introduction to something involving Iron Man, the volume turned down low enough to not bother

them but loud enough to cover their mother's homecoming. Turning the television off, darkness filled the room, with only the glow of a nightlight from the hallway for illumination.

"Mom?" Xavier yawned, waking up as the tv turned off. "How was work? Did that doctor live?"

"He did," she whispered. "It was touch and go for a while, but he pulled through." She paused, glancing at her daughter's sleeping form and her regular breathing. "Chewy texted me about Arya. Said she just ran out, without a word. What happened?"

"No idea, she wouldn't tell me. We had dinner and watched movies after. She was acting normal… for her."

Lily took a deep breath, willing herself to fulfill her task. "We need to wake her. There's something we need to talk about. Now."

She was filled with dread but time had long since passed to tell her children the horrible truth she'd protected them from for sixteen years, giving them a normal childhood they could treasure in their memories before everything changed. And everything was about to change, Lily knew for certain.

"Alright, let me go pee and I'll be right back," Xavier stretched and stood up. His mother shook her head and told him to meet her in the kitchen.

Kneeling next to Arya's resting body, her peaceful face, she was hesitant to wake her daughter. Lily felt fierce love for her daughter and remorse for what was to be said. Steadying herself again, inhaling deeply, she reached out for her daughter, shaking her shoulder gently, whispering her name. As Arya opened her dazzling green eyes, her face filled with joy, recognizing her mother, the same way she'd always smiled at her mother when she opened her eyes as a baby.

"Wake up, Baby… I need to talk to you and Xavy," Lily stood as Arya untangled her limbs and stood, stretching her arms behind her head.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Arya whispered, anxiety filling her once more. "I can tell it's something."

"I'll tell you downstairs. Freshen up and meet me in the kitchen," her mother replied, giving her daughter a last glance before walking back down the hall to the stairs.

Arya stood up, feeling tired and nervous, which made her stomach off. Rushing to the bathroom, she relieved herself and stared into the mirror at her face as she washed her hands. “It’s okay, Arya,” she whispered to herself, repeating it over and over, to calm herself. It wasn’t working, but her mother called her again and she had to go. “Everything will be fine, Arya,” she whispered, making her way to the kitchen.

★ ★ ★

The room was too quiet for the number of people in it, Arya thought to herself as she walked towards the door. The clock on her phone read 2:23am, making this family meeting ripe with peculiarities even before it began. Her mother had never woken them in the middle of the night to have a talk in their lives. This worried Arya and dread filled her. Her heart sped up and her blood ran cold but she took a few calming breaths and pushed the door to the kitchen open.

At the small circular table in the kitchen, her mother sat with a cup of coffee and a pink bakers box, unopened. Xavier was at the counter, making himself a cup of coffee and filling the kettle with water for Arya’s tea. He was truly the best brother anyone could ask for, she thought to herself. She’d forgotten the stranger from earlier, forgotten her panic, too consumed with the current mystery their mother was about to explain.

Her brother was unusually gentle with his actions, as if he sensed her apprehension, which he probably did. They did have that Twintuition thing going for them. Her mother was oddly still, simply sipping her coffee, black with one sugar, waiting. Arya sat at the table and opened the pink baker’s box reveal half a dozen donuts from Xavier’s favorite donut shop, The Smiley Nut. Arya grabbed a napkin from the squirrel napkin holder her mother bought at a dollar store and selected one of the two powdered raspberry jam filled donuts. Her mother mimicked her actions, selecting a glazed strawberry jelly instead. Finally the tea kettle’s whistle broke the silence.

“Tea’s up, Ya…” Xavier’s words seemed strangely out of place given the atmosphere of the room, filled with so much tension it was palpable in the air. She got up from the table and fixed her tea, a hibiscus dominant raspberry blend with honey and a little cream. Xavier was on his second cup

of coffee, stirring the creamer in before taking a satisfying gulp. “Ah, that’s better.”

Arya rolled her eyes as they both joined their mother at the table. Her mother fiddled with the napkin under the untouched donut. Taking a deep breath, she met their gaze, looking deeply into Arya’s eyes then Xavier’s.

“I have been hiding something from you since you were old enough to ask me who your father was. When you started asking questions, I didn’t know how to tell you and I pushed it off for as long as I could.” Her voice was just barely above a whisper, the silent room around them seemed nearly able to drown her out. “I love you, more than words can ever say. You are my life, both of you, the most valuable people in the world to me… but soon you will come of age and time does not forgive my feelings…”

“Mom,” Xavier interrupted. “What are you talking about? Hid from us? Time? You aren’t making any sense…” His voice trailed off as Arya laid her hand on his forearm.

“Let her talk, Xavy.”

Xavier looked into his sister’s fear filled eyes. “Sorry,” he muttered, sitting back and crossing his arms over his chest. “Go on.”

Lilith stood, obviously struggling with her emotions. Her eyes filled with tears. “There’s no easy way to say this… I’m not who you think I am…” she began. “I am your mother and I am a doctor, but I’m something else… we are something else…” Her voice weakened.

Arya felt a surge of sympathy for her mother. Whatever it was their mother was about to tell them, Arya thought, it must be awful. “Mom?”

“Arya, Xavier… I am not mortal and I haven’t been since the time of Eden…” She took a breath,” Arya, what do you know of Lilith?”

“What the fuh?” Xavier began.

“XAVIER, language!” Her mother admonished. “I know it sounds crazy but I am not a mortal and, my loves, my dear sweet children, neither are you…” she paused, pushing back her chair, standing. “Arya, you love your mythology… Do you know of Lilith?” Her mother asked again, waited patiently.

A moment passed before Arya took an unsteady breath and answered. “Well, she’s the mother of all demons, the first wife of Adam and a Succubus… according to lore, anyways,” Arya responded, surprised her

voice worked at all. “She’s supposed to be the wife of Lucifer Morningstar… the devil.”

Xavier wore expression of strained calm, his dark eyes pooled with anger and confusion. He stayed seated, leaning back as if he didn’t have a care in the world, his arms crossed on his chest, his donut remaining uneaten.

“Well, the Children of God always did have their own version of events and they wrote the history books…” Their mother sounded bitter as she trailed off, before continuing in a calmer voice, “Lilith is the Mother of Demons and Witches, it’s true. Long story, too long for now, and really unimportant. It’s also true that I am Lucifer’s wife, the Queen of Hell…”

Xavier started to shake, still leaning back, acting as if he didn’t care. Arya was staring at her mother like she was a stranger.

“But we went our own ways a great many years ago, agreeing to come together only once every century…”

Xavier wasn’t the smartest boy in school but he wasn’t slow. Leaning forward, his chair landed with a loud thud, causing Arya to wince. “Are you saying the Devil is our father?”

“No, that’s not possible,” Arya whispered. “You said you didn’t know who he was… That you’d been stressed and hadn’t been safe. You always say that’s why I need to…” Arya’s voice tapered off, tears brimming in her eyes.

Their mother took a moment, looking at the crushed defeat in her son’s eyes and the agony on her daughter’s face. “Yes, I lied to you.” Her voice was almost inaudible. “Yes. Lucifer is your father,” she repeated.

“Why are you even telling us this? Obviously it didn’t matter for sixteen friggin years?” Xavier stood. His anger caused him to pace the kitchen while he glared at their mother.

“I’m telling you this because tonight, at midnight, after you ascend, he is coming to collect you.”

“Ascend?” Xavier said as Arya cried out, “What? We’re leaving?”

“What the hell does that mean? Collect us? Like property? To go where?” His voice was loud, seething with venom. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Mom?” Arya whispered, too afraid to be angry. She was still sitting at the table, although she’d brought her knees to her chest, resting her feet on

the seat of the small dining chair. “Mommy?” Arya sounded like a little girl; her voice a mousy squeak.

A tear fell from Lilith’s eyes as she saw the devastation she’d just caused her children. She’d never before been the reason for their suffering and in this moment, she knew she was to be blamed for all of it.

“I’m so sorry, my loves…” She wrapped her arms around her daughter’s hunched form and continued. “This deal was made. the bargain struck before you were ever a dream…” She sounded serenely reasonable as she explained, “Hundreds of years ago, eons after being flung from Eden, years after Lucifer had fallen from his God’s Grace, we found each other… Two lonely immortal beings wandering the earth, isolated from all other creatures in our own hells…”

Xavier sat down again, leaning forward, putting his elbow on the table, resting his head against his hand. Lilith released her as Arya shifted, unbending her knees and sitting up straight. Their eyes met for a moment before Lilith looked away, sipping her coffee.

“He was divinely handsome, like you Xavy. His darkened skin, not quite brown but golden, like yours, his eyes were deep and dark like yours. Only his were filled with mystery and secrets I wanted to know from the moment I looked into them… I was such a fool… you see, he was absolutely the most magnificent thing I’d ever seen in all my days on earth.”

“What?” Xavier muttered, annoyed but no longer visibly angry, calmed by his mother’s story. Arya said nothing, sipping her now cold tea.

“He’d been looking for me, he later told me.” She paused. "He’d disagreed with his Father, the God, and been cast out of Heaven, he said… At the time, I was so alone… mine and Adam’s first children, Aya and Baan, had long ago left me, in search of their Father, in themselves, in search of their futures…” Another tear dripped down her face. “I didn’t begrudge them. They had their reasons…”

“So we have other siblings…” Arya said curiously.

“You do. A few.” Lilith nodded solemnly. “Although, most of my children were from mortal men and were mortal beings and have long ago died. Only my first children are still alive.” She sighed. “They were Children of Adam, Aya and Baan, but I have not seen them in centuries.”

“Wait, Aya? Like Aya the vampire queen in the legends?” Arya laughed. “You’re kidding! This has to be some joke.” The whole thing was completely preposterous. “You almost had me.”

“What? A vampire? Mom? What the hell?” Xavier stood and paced the kitchen, without looking at his mother or sister. He wasn’t convinced his mother was kidding.

“I’m not lying, Arya,” Lilith said sadly. “It’s true. I know it sounds crazy… you’ve grown up in the mortal world, living in peace and you’ve been allowed a normal life… it was the bargain I made with Lucifer, that you be allowed a normal, mortal life. You see, we didn’t fall in love right away, Lucifer and I. It was more of a strict arrangement than a marriage.”

Arya stood up, putting the kettle back on the burner for another cup. She didn’t look at her mother, still not sure her mother wasn’t pranking them. Xavier moved to the seat she vacated and leaned back, his arms once again folded across his chest.

“I was with a mortal man at the time. A distant grandson of Adam and his second wife… He was a brave warrior, a handsome man with yellow hair and eyes of sea blue. He didn’t know what I was but loved me, despite my secrets. We had twins, a boy and a girl, just like you two and just like my first two.” Tears dripped down Lilith’s cheeks as her eyes glazed at the memory. “When they turned sixteen, the magic inside them manifested and they were able to tap into their gifts.” She fell silent as tears now flowed like a stream from her eyes.

“Mommy,” Arya said, wrapping her arms around their mother. Arya felt broken

She choked back tears and scoffed. “And that’s when their father stopped loving me. He called them abominations… He murdered them as they slept and tried to kill me.” The bitterness emanated from Lilith as she recalled one of her darkest hours. “But I cannot die and so I was forced to live with the loss of my children.”

“Wait so he killed them? For being witches?” Xavier said, finally breaking his silence.

“Yes. He was terrified of their power and he felt it was… unnatural. He said it was evil and so was I.” Moments passed in silence before she continued, taking a sip of her cold coffee to wet her lips. “That’s when Lucifer found me, consoled me for the loss he knew to be awful and asked

me to be his Queen, his equal. You see, not even Adam, my first husband, wanted me to be his equal. His God demanded to be worshipped and I would not so Adam tried beating me into submission, and when I refused, his creator threw me from Eden like trash, nearly dead."

"That's awful," Arya whispered.

The tea kettle had barely whistled when she turned off the burner, pouring the water into a cup and sitting next to her mother again. She no longer thought her mother was playing a game.

A faint smile crossed Lilith's lips as she continued to weave the history of her life into a story for her children. "The Goddess, she was my Creator and she was once a powerful being in her own right. The God of Abraham's equal when this world began," Lilith said with conviction. "She saved me from Adam and his God and all their hatred… granting me safe haven in a magnificent land far from Eden."

"Eden?" Xavier muttered, not realizing he'd even spoken aloud.

Ignoring him, Lilith continued, "she created other humans, like Adam, without my… special gifts, so I wouldn't be alone. Men and women, who had children and who lived alongside my own children. We were the Children of the Goddess."

As his mother drifted into a sort of haze, Xavier got up to put the kettle back on and fixed another pot of coffee. It was now 4:30 in the morning. What a way to start his sixteenth birthday, he thought. If his mother was to be believed, in less than twenty hours, he would meet his father, the Devil. A few minutes later they were all seated around the table, eating their donuts and drinking in silence, a slight reprieve from the tension. Finally, after finishing her glazed jelly, she wiped her hands on a napkin and took a deep breath, sighing.

"As you can imagine, Lucifer's offer was nothing short of everything I'd dreamed, to be treated like an equal, with respect and dignity. I'd already been cast away from two loves of my life, despite how much I loved them. I'd already been a mother and had my children stolen away. Lucifer's offer gave me the chance to protect any others I might one day have." She smiled at her children, touching both of her children's hands softly. "He knew who I was, of course, and he wanted to rebel against his God by making me his partner, the way God had refused to allow me to be with Adam. It was the perfect match. So it seemed."

Another deep breath and heavy sigh interrupted her soliloquy but Lilith continued right away. “I didn’t have children with Lucifer for the first five hundred years of our marriage. We’d spent the entire time in hell and I refused to allow a child to be born amongst Lucifer’s perverse creations… his Demons. While I am Grandmother of Vampires, I am not nor have I ever been the Mother of Demons. Those were Lucifer’s unique companions, dark creatures who did his bidding.” She shuddered. “He was so obsessed with creating something better than his God, but nothing he made could survive in the mortal world of mankind. Although he could cause chaos with his disgusting creations, infecting the Children of Adam, while my own descendants are immune to possessions.”

“Mom, you’re losing us here,” Xavier blurted out, glancing at his sister’s puzzled expression. “We get it. Lucifer was awful and you clearly aren’t in hell anymore so what gives?” Xavier didn’t mince his words, interrupting her thoughts to focus her.

“Right. Sorry,” she mumbled, taking another deep breath. “Anyways, Lucifer saw my unhappiness and my loneliness and in an attempt to win my favor, he granted me a gift. I could live with the mortals, walk amongst them, so long as I provided him with a child, once every five hundred years on their sixteenth birthday,” Her anguish was clear when she dared to look at her children.

“What?” The twins said in shocked unison.

“You see, tonight at the midnight hour, your father is coming to decide which of you will be his Heir to the Kingdom of Hell…” Lilith whispered.

“Why? Why sixteen? Why at midnight?” Xavier demanded, leaning forward in anticipation, his leg shaking under the table. Arya stayed quiet as she had no idea what she should say.

“Because that’s when you’ll get your gifts from the Goddess,” she replied almost happily. “That’s when you’ll Ascend into your true self, receiving your birthright.”

“Gifts?” Arya asked as Xavier questioned, “Ascend?”

Lilith couldn’t help but smile. “Tonight, at midnight on your sixteenth birthday, my loves, I will perform the ritual to call the Goddess to imbue in you the magic you are destined for. Lucifer will come tonight and he will decide which of you will be declared Heir to the Throne, Prince or Princess

of Hell, and which of you will be allowed to live your life as you choose, as a witch or warlock."

"Witch?" Arya whispered. "You mean like spells and burnings?"

"Warlock?" Xavier was furious. "What the fu!"

"Language, Xavier! I am still your mother!" Lily admonished, momentarily bewildering the twins with the normalcy of her mothering. "I know this has been a lot of information and you must be very tired. I am so sorry for keeping this from you… I should have told you sooner, I just didn't see how to do it without stealing the remaining innocence you had… and shattering your world." She kissed both of her children on the forehead. "Go get some sleep, we'll talk later."

Lilith walked out of the kitchen, with a last glance at her children, who hadn't moved. Still sitting dazed, Arya thought back to earlier when she and Latoya had wished for magical powers. Be careful what you wish for, she thought to herself.

Chapter Two

Arya went to her room after the night's illuminating talk with their mother and she wasn't quite sure what to do. She was tired but couldn't imagine sleeping. Instead, she decided to do some research and spent the next few hours reading every legend she could find about her mother.

Lilith was to be feared, if the stories were right, but that didn't match the idea she had of her own mother; the renowned trauma surgeon who saved nearly every patient she touched from certain death. Arya's mother was kind and loving, but these stories called her a baby killer and demon. The research on her father's legacy hadn't yielded results that were any better and based on her mother's own words, he was not the loving parent she'd dreamed of one day finding. In fact, his story was terrifying. She shouldn't have been surprised, since the King of Hell was notoriously evil.

While Arya had been researching, Xavier went to his room, turned on Game of Thrones and fell asleep to the scene where Ned Stark's head was removed. His dreams were filled with nightmarish scenarios, first with him being selected as the Prince of Hell and then Arya instead. Each had their own horrors. He woke with a shudder and fear in his heart when his sister knocked on his door.

"Xavy?" he heard her call quietly. "Are you awake?"

Groaning softly to himself, he got up and let her in. He had made a habit of locking his door since he'd been twelve and his mother had the misfortune of walking in during a private moment that had left them both embarrassed for weeks.

"What's up, Ya?" Xavier was surprised at how normal his voice sounded, as if nothing was different. "Happy birthday, Little Sister," he smiled. Her eyes sparkled, and she hugged him tightly. Wrapping his arms around her smaller, almost frail body, he held her close to him. "It'll be okay, Ya. You and me, together, we can conquer anything."

Arya pulled away with a look of masked pain beneath a smile, nodding. She glanced at the television to see her namesake. Her mother had admitted years ago to naming her after the small but mighty character. "Happy birthday, Big Brother," she said at last.

"So what's up?" Xavier crashed back onto his bed as Arya sat in a chair covered with what she hoped was clean laundry.

"I've been doing some research," she began. Xavier tisked with his teeth but said nothing. He knew her well enough to know that research made her feel comfortable in distressing situations. "I am afraid of tonight."

"It's just a party, Ya. Nothing to be afraid of," Xavier replied, purposely ignoring the real reason she was scared. "I know you don't like socializing, but damn!" He laughed, his eyes filled with forced amusement. Arya didn't even crack a smile.

"Xavy, be serious. You know this isn't about that… Didn't you hear mom? She said he would take one of us away. Tonight!" Arya's voice was filled with resentment and anger, something unusual to her. Xavier sighed, knowing nothing he could say would make her feel better about their impending doom. "I can't lose you, Xavy!"

Xavier pulled himself off his bed again and crouched in front of his sister. Pushing the red curls out of her face, he made her look him in the eye. "I am not going to leave you, do you understand? I am never going to let that happen. We aren't going anywhere… I'll fight him if I have to, I promise. I'll protect us." His voice filled with conviction and determination. Arya shook her head. "I'll protect you."

"You'll never win," she whispered.

"I can't lose if you're by my side," Xavier smiled at her. She gave a weak chuckle but said nothing. "We're the Dynamic Duo, Ya… Remember

that time in third grade? When Brian and Luke tried to jump me but you kicked them both in the balls and they never tried again?" Arya blushed, fighting a smile. "We're the One-Two-Knockout, Ya."

They touched their foreheads together, closing their eyes and sat in a strange, hunched embrace. "I'll always protect you, Ya, even from Satan himself."

Xavier had always been there for Arya and she really couldn't imagine a life without him. They were twins, together since before memory. They had plans. Plans to graduate high school, plans to go to college, to get jobs and maybe move west, where the ocean was. They'd always wanted to see the ocean, having grown up landlocked. So many dreams yet unfulfilled. The ring of Xavier's cell phone interrupted their sibling bonding.

"Speak of the devil, metaphorically!" Xavier joked as he answered. "What's up, Luke?"

Arya stood up, offering her brother another faux smile and left his room. This was their last day of normal, whatever normal was, and they did have a birthday party to get ready for.

★★★

Around two in the afternoon, Lily Herstory was waking up from her fit-filled sleep, dreading the moment of Lucifer's return. Her mind was reeling from her confession to her children. She'd spent the last sixteen years doing everything she could to prepare her children for whatever hell, for lack of a better word, he could inflict on them, without letting them know.

From therapy to work through and control their emotions, something absolutely vital when tapping into magic, to various martial arts classes to learn fighting skills she knew they'd need. If only they had known she meant against demons and monsters, not the bully at the local high school, maybe they would have tried harder.

Lucifer would probably pick Xavier, due to his obvious skills, strength and masculinity. Lucifer was a classic misogynist, even if he'd recognized Lilith as his equal. Making Lilith his queen was simply a tactic to anger his Creator and it had worked. Lilith shuddered as she remembered how the God had punished her descendants with witch hunts and burnings. Lilith had a great many fears when it came to Lucifer and her children. The fact

that Xavier looked nearly exactly like his father had concerned her when the twins were small. She worried he would be like his father in other ways, but he had always been gentle, tempered by the presence of his sister, a small replica of Lilith herself.

They were the first children Lilith had with Lucifer and the deal she'd made allowed her to raise her children as mortal beings. Lilith had wanted to have two children raised like any other child, as innocent as possible. She raised them without religion, without fear of Children of God or Creatures of Night, without Heaven or Hell and suffering. She raised them with love, hope and acceptance. She raised them with optimism and understanding. All the things children needed and all the things she knew Lucifer was incapable of.

With determination, Lilith slowly began to dress and prepare for her babies' sweet sixteen, such a strangely mundane event to mark the end of their innocent lives. She had two presents wrapped in silver paper on her dresser, ready to give her children. The last gift she would give them before they inherited their powers from the Goddess. Once they were imbued with their magic, Lucifer would decide which of her children he was going to claim, which she would lose forever because of the terrible deal she'd made to escape Hell herself.

She gazed at her reflection in the mirror and shook her hair out, the lines magically vanishing from her face. Lilith stared at Arya's face and sighed before shaking her hair out, the lines reappearing, aging herself once more. Putting on a neutral expression, she tore her eyes away from the mirror and picked up the small silver packages. She flipped the light off as she left the sanctuary of her room to face her, rightfully, angry children.

★★★

The doorbell rang as Arya changed into the party dress she'd picked out with her best friend, Latoya. Eyeing herself in the mirror, her mind wandered. She couldn't help wondering whether she'd still know Latoya tomorrow, if she'd return to school on Monday. Would she be alone, she worried. Could she tell her best friend any of this? Did the Hernandezes, who'd been friends with her mother her whole life, know? Were they witches? Or maybe werewolves? Vampires? Her mind raced with a

thousand different possibilities running into each other, occupying her to the point that she didn't see Latoya walk in and flop on her bed.

"Earth to Arya!" A voice broke through her clouded consciousness. Blinking, Arya became aware of her friend's presence. "Girl, you were gone for a minute there. Thought maybe you were having a vision." Latoya laughed, "Amazing dress! Twirl that thing, Girl!"

The girls laughed and Arya was suddenly filled with ease. She spun around several times before falling lazily onto her bed next to her friend.

"I love it. Thank you for making me buy it," she giggled. "Even if it did cost me three weeks worth of wages and we're only wearing it to a diner."

Latoya rolled her eyes and got off Arya's bed. "Girl, you're missing the big picture here: You only turn sixteen once, it should be special. Even if you have to share your day with a boy." Latoya made a face to Arya in the mirror that caused them both to giggle. "Now sit down and let me do your makeup. You can go ahead and get lost in your head again. I need you to stay still."

Arya studied her friend's face as Latoya masterfully contoured Arya's pale, plain face into modelesque. Latoya was stunningly beautiful in a way that Arya envied. Wearing gold, sparkly eyeshadow and gold tinted lip gloss, Latoya's skin looked richer with deep bronze undertones. She wore a gold and black sequined flapper dress that made Latoya seem like she was glowing. Her naturally tightly coiled curls were parted in the middle, held in place by a gold-tinted feathered rhinestone headband that made her look like she'd stepped out of a Gatsby film. As Latoya painted Arya's face, Arya's mind filled with memories of her best friend.

Latoya was the most popular girl in their grade and easily the prettiest, most confident and outgoing. When the girls were younger, maybe four or five, some boys were picking on Arya, pushing her down into the mud and making her cry. Out of nowhere, Latoya threw rocks at them and told them to get away. They called her a racist name and Arya had never seen someone stand so proud and defiant as Latoya did that day. She just threw more rocks at the boys until they ran away.

When they came back with the teacher, Arya remembered lying and telling the teacher that she hadn't seen anyone throw rocks, but she did hear those boys calling her a bad name. They always fought for each other but

Latoya had never needed a savior. She was more than capable of standing up for herself. Arya, though, had gotten lucky to be best friends with Latoya, since she was nowhere near as confident or outgoing as Latoya or her brother.

If anyone was the definition of co-dependent, it was Arya. Meek, mild Arya. Everyone always noticed her for her hair so she was known of, but other than Latoya, Arya couldn't think of a single person at school that actually knew her. Everyone knew her brother. Mr. Popular, Mr. Varsity-Hockey-Freshman-Year, Mr. Homecoming-King Xavier. In fact, Arya was pretty convinced most of the people were coming to the party didn't even realize they were related. It's part of why she loved Latoya and why she was so glad her friend insisted Arya dress up like a princess. It made her feel special, even if it wouldn't last.

"So what did you get from your mom?" Latoya asked, carefully applying mascara to her friend's eyelashes. "Anything good?"

Arya tried not to physically wince. "Nothing yet."

"Well, she's bound to get you something awesome. Remember my last birthday? She got me diamond studs and I'm just her coworkers' kid."

"You're more than that and you know it. You're like her other, prettier, more amazing daughter," Arya insisted.

Latoya laughed her off. "Yea, yea yea… anyways, your gift will arrive in exactly one hour, so we'd better hurry. Don't want to be late!" she said mysteriously, putting on the final touches of makeup. "Now close your eyes so I can use the setting spray and that will stay put."

Obeying her friend, Arya sighed, calm and content. "You're my best friend, Latoya, and I love you," Arya said after she'd looked in the mirror at her strange and enhanced reflection, hugging her friend tightly. "Please never forget how much I love you."

Latoya squeezed her back and whispered, "Never, Girl. Friends for life."

★★★

Xavier woke again as Latoya arrived, hearing her voice in the hallway. Xavier had a serious crush on her since they were in middle school, but since she was his sister's best friend, she was untouchable. Not that Latoya

looked at him like that, ever. Her friendship with Arya had lifted a burden Xavier didn't realize he carried. He was always so worried about Arya but Latoya helped. When the girls had stayed friends after some horrible rumors were spread about them, he knew they would never betray each other, something he was grateful for. Still, her voice was like music to his ears and he listened as they talked in the room next to his.

It didn't matter to Xavier what he wore to the party but his mom had seen his sister's dress and insisted he dress up. Weird how that was only a week ago, he thought to himself. She'd taken him shopping and picked him up a shirt in a shade darker than Arya's dress. She picked him out nice pants and new shoes, since he'd outgrown his old dress shoes. They'd had such a good day, his mom and him. Eating lunch in the food court and talking about everything in Xavier's life. And nothing of her's, he thought bitterly, since nothing she said matters after tonight.

Xavier was angry and worried. No matter what, he knew he'd be fine. He could go far from his lying mother and he'd be fine, but leaving Arya didn't seem possible. They'd spent their whole lives together. He protected her from the monsters that didn't exist. Now that he knew there were real monsters, how would he protect her if he was gone? Despite all his worrying, it never occurred to him that Lucifer might take his sister and his mother had implied as much. He looked in the mirror, buttoning his shirt, trying to put his mask of calm back on, but the rage was there. His last night on earth and he was too angry to enjoy it.

★★★

With Latoya at the house, the Herstorys weren't able to continue talking about their impending ascension. Xavier, quieter than usual, looked so handsome despite his brooding and Arya, well Lilith decided she'd never seen her daughter more dazzling than she did in that moment. Latoya, of course, with her contrasting dark beauty and lovely sparkling dress, could be mistaken for a model any day.

"You girls look so beautiful and Xavy, what a handsome face," Lilith gushed over her children, taking photos with her phone. "I can't believe how quickly you've grown."

Lilith stared at both her children, struggling to keep their composure and hide their anger with her, unbeknownst to Latoya. Xavier forced a smile that appeared more of a grimace, Arya's seemed somewhat elated tinged with sadness, and Latoya's large white smile, outlined in golden lipstick, was the most genuinely, blissfully happy. Lilith felt a pang of utter sadness to know that was short lived as well. Still, her children were magnificently stunning, even next to their remarkably striking friend.

"Dr. Lily, I wanted to thank you for giving birth to my favorite person on the planet… and Xavy," Latoya joked, hugging the matriarch. "Now, let's go before we're late. Uncle Chewy is expecting us!"

She ordered as she marched the twins out the door while their mother trailed, locking the door behind them. Outside, the twins were standing, staring at a large white limousine sitting in front of their house. Arya grasped Xavier's hand.

Latoya shouted, "TA-DA!! It's a gift from my parents who are working but totally love you guys."

Arya breathed a sigh of relief, releasing Xavier's hand, a gesture that had gone unnoticed by Latoya but not their mother. Her chest tightened with agony and she forced a smile. Tonight was their last normal night.

"That was so very nice of your parents, Latoya. Please tell Tyrone and Andrea thank you," Lily hugged Latoya's shoulder, to avoid smearing the work of art she'd created from makeup. "You look so lovely, sweet girl. You all do."

"Thanks, Mom," Xavier called as he crawled into the limo. Latoya clambered in after him followed by Arya. Lily felt her heart breaking, piece by piece, as she climbed in behind them.

"This is so cool," Arya giggled to Latoya. "Our first limo!!"

"It was my idea, obvs. I wanted to celebrate in style, but I was surprised when the doctors agreed," Latoya explained.

"Your parents are some of the best people ever… I really love your mom and dad," Xavier replied. "Will they be there?"

"My mom said she'd stop by but I don't know about my Dad. You know him, work comes first." Although Latoya kept the smile on her face, she sounded bittersweet. Lilith smiled. Her kids had the same complaints about her, but how could she not use her own Goddess-Given gifts to help

save those who would otherwise perish? Life has always been and will always be precious to Lilith.

"Oh, I hope she comes," whispered Arya. Her eyes stung from sadness as she stared at the town passing them. Within moments they pulled into the parking lot of Chewy's Diner, which was surprisingly full. "There are so many people here!"

"Well, duh, Girl! It's your BURFDAY!" Latoya shouted the last word, causing Arya to laugh at the way they'd pronounced it the year they'd both lost their front teeth. "Time! To! Part! A!" She yelled climbing out of the limo. "Come on, Birthday Twins. Get ready to have the time of your young lives!"

With those words, she ran into the diner, leaving the Herstory family alone.

"Go on, my loves, your friends are waiting." Lily persuaded her children. "You'll regret wasting a moment if you don't hurry." With a dirty look cast back at his mother, Xavier left without another word. Arya simply took a deep breath and followed. "I love you both beyond words," Lilith whispered to the empty open door.

★★★

The diner was covered in streamers and balloons. A "HAPPY BIRTHDAY" banner hung above their normal seats, and even Uncle Chewy was wearing a party hat. There were about thirty kids in the diner, taking up every possible seat, ordering food and laughing, talking amongst themselves. Each table was covered in a different colored table cloth, some glittery and some plaid or checkered.

Pausing at the door where they could feel the beat of the music, Xavier looked at his sister, who was more beautiful than he'd ever seen her. "No matter what happens later, let's just pretend it won't," he said to her. "You look amazing, by the way, like a Princess."

Arya blushed, her cheeks nearly matching the red of her hair. "You look great too, Xavy. Happy Birthday, Twinnifer."

Xavier chortled and opened the door.

"SURPRISE!!!" shouted nearly everyone in the diner as the music stopped.

“But it wasn’t a surprise,” Xavier protested as Arya squealed with delight.

“Happy Birthday, Arya! Happy Birthday, Xavier!” Uncle Chewy said, coming forward to hug them and snap party hats on their heads.

“And now you’re ready to party.” Latoya laughed. The chatter started again as Latoya restarted the music.

Occasionally, people would come up to Arya, complimenting her dress, wishing her a happy birthday, but the main event of the party, much like everywhere else, was Xavier. There was not a time when he wasn’t the most popular boy in the room. Everyone was always trying to befriend him, make him take them out on dates, but Xavier didn’t date. Sure, he flirted and had made out with a couple girls, but Xavier wasn’t ready for a serious relationship. Almost all the girls that pined after him gathered the courage to ask him to dance, insisting he’d love their gifts.

Latoya sat with Arya and together they quietly laughed at the faces of girls left disappointed because of his lack of interest. Occasionally, Xavier would look their way and they’d burst into giggles. Xavier’d cock his eyebrow and chuckle, talking to his friends, Luke and Brian. Arya didn’t know them very well, since they hardly spent any time at the Herstory house, but she knew enough. Luke was a preacher’s son, a typical attractive, six foot tall white guy with sandy brown hair, brown hazel eyes.

At seventeen, he was handsome in a rugged way, wearing flannel, jeans and boots most days. Brian, a nerdy Asian-American, was the cutest guy in school in Arya’s mind. He had long black hair he kept in a single braid down his back and a squared jaw with a goatee trimmed short. He wore t-shirts with math equations as jokes and shorts and flip-flops, even when it was snowing. He was taller than Luke by an inch or two but shorter than Xavier. Since they all worked out together three times a week for the hockey team, each of them was muscular. Latoya loved to joke they were the most ripped guys in all of Peak’s Village.

“You know what would make my brother super happy on his birthday?” Arya asked Latoya when they finally found a moment alone.

“What’s that? Besides the awesome Hockey jersey I got him already,” Latoya teased

“Dance with him?”

Latoya sighed. “Girl, you know I don’t feel that way about him…” She glanced at Xavier surrounded by Brian and Luke. “I tell you what, I’ll give him one dance if you ask that fine lookin Brian to dance too.”

“Ugh, fine, deal.” Arya pretended to be annoyed, but Latoya knew better.

The girls walked over to where the boys were standing and Latoya let out a dramatic sigh. “Xavier, would you please dance with me?” Winking at Arya, she gave Xavier her best smile, thrusting out her hand. Xavier’s cheeks darkened as he blushed, taking it. Latoya elbowed Arya in the ribs. “Your turn.”

Wincing, Arya forced a smile. “Brian, would you like to dance?”

Brian grinned and followed them to the space Chewy’d cleared to make a dance floor.

“Thank you for coming to my party,” Arya said awkwardly. “Or I mean, thanks for coming for Xavy.”

“I came for you too.”

He pulled her in a little closer as the song played. Arya’s heart skipped a beat as she forgot about everything else, lost in the moment. Here she was, dancing with the boy she liked and he was flirting with her too. She could have burst with joy.

“That’s nice of you to say,” she whispered. The latest Taylor Swift song began to play as she leaned into him.

“I’m not just saying it. Come with me,” he said, holding her hand.

He guided her slowly through the diner. Latoya’s eyes followed them and gave her a subtle thumbs up when Arya followed Brian out the diner door. The night had grown cold. The stars twinkled and the full moon’s light cut through the darkness of the parking lot. Arya looked at Brian in the moonlight and tried to steady her breathing but she was nervous. Rubbing her arms to warm herself, she tried not to visibly shiver.

“So I got you something,” he began, clearly feeling the tension. “I already talked to Xavy and he said it was cool so yea… I don’t know, here.”

He pulled a small box out of his pocket and thrust it into her hands. Arya smiled softly and mumbled thanks as she held it and turned it over and over in her fingers.

“Open it,” he demanded before softening his tone, “please.”

“Thank you,” Arya whispered.

She unwrapped the pale pink paper from a small blue box. Lifting the lid of the box, she gasped. Inside was a simple silver chain with a vintage style pendant of the sun and moon in orbit around the earth.

"It's beautiful… Brian, thank you." She awkwardly hugged her brother's friend. She gently pulled the necklace from the box."Wait, what do you mean you asked my brother?"

"Here, let me help you," Brian said, taking the chain from her. As he opened the clasp, he moved behind her. "Move your hair?" He whistled when she turned to face him. "Wow, it's perfect on you."

"Thank you," she said again. An awkward pause before she repeated her question. "What do you mean you asked my brother?"

Brian looked sheepish. "He's my best friend. I figured if I was going to ask his sister out, I'd better make sure he was cool."

Arya's face broke into a huge grin. "You're asking me out?"

"Yea," he mumbled, avoiding eye contact. "I mean, if you'll say yes, I definitely am, but if the answer is no, then no this was just a giant misunderstanding,"

Her smile grew. "I'd love to," she replied in her sweetest, most confident voice she could muster. "But I don't know when… things are changing in our family soon. I promise I'll text you next week. We can pick a date then."

"How about next weekend? A movie? I hear the new Marvel movie is pretty good," he replied. The night air was cool on Arya's bare shoulders, a wolf howled in the distance and she shivered. "You're freezing…"

"Haven't you seen that, like, four times with Luke and Xavy?" she jokingly asked, shivering again.

"Let's go inside. We'll figure something out."

Brian led them back inside the diner, which was still loud, sounds of music, chatter and laughter filled the air. The bell at the door chimed, causing Latoya to catch Arya's eye and wink before laughing loudly. Xavier shifted his gaze away when he met Arya's, but she saw the trace of an amused smile on his lips. Uncle Chewy sat with Lilith and Andrea Hernandez, glancing occasionally at one Twin or the other, worried looks on their faces. Lily noticed Arya staring and forced a smile, rising up from the bar stool.

“Cake!” Lily called from across the room. Chewy went into the kitchen and brought out a huge three tiered cake with sixteen candles on the top tier. “Happy Birthday to my beautiful children. I have been so blessed to be your mother.”

Xavier and Arya were guided to the middle table of the diner, with a gold shimmering tablecloth, and seated across from each other. The room burst into song, singing the familiar happy birthday tune. Xavier and Arya laughed together and blew out the candles on their last normal birthday cake. They were happy in that moment. Latoya decided after the candles were out, she should make a speech.

“My Girl here is my best friend,” she began, dramatically fanning her face as if to stop herself from crying. “Since we were babies in the same playpen. Xavier was there too, for some reason,” she joked, the room rewarded her with a laugh. “I just want to say I love you, Girl, and my life wouldn’t be the same without you. Friends forever.” Arya had gotten up and hugged Latoya tightly, accidentally smashing some of her curls. “Girl, watch my hair!”

Letting her friend go, Arya grinned at Xavier who was actually enjoying himself. Their minds were briefly distracted from their worries and fears. They were living in the moment, loving their friends and family. For a few precious moments, while eating cake and opening presents, they were normal sixteen year old kids.

Around ten, the party began to clear out. Xavier had loaded the gifts into the limo, which had stayed in the parking lot for the duration of the party. Arya hugged Uncle Chewy and thanked him for their party.

“Any time, you sweet girl,” his voice choked up, “You’re my girl, never forget. Tell your brother too, he’s my boy.” Arya’s face flickered with confusion before he hugged her again and kissed the top of her head, filling her with calm.

“Time to go, Girl… I’m tired and I want to curl in my jammies and sleep!” Latoya called from the door.

Arya looked around the diner, decorated for the party, plates and cups everywhere, and sighed happily. “Thank you for this, Uncle Chewy,” she said again before following Latoya out to the limo where her brother and mother were waiting.

Xavier was staring at his phone, ignoring their mother, when the girls climbed in. Latoya leaned against Lilith and closed her eyes while Arya pulled her phone out and checked the time. Thirty-seven minutes to midnight.

Chapter Three

The limo dropped Latoya at her house, where her father outside was waiting. Tyrone Hernandez waved to Lilith. She got out of the limo and spoke to Tyrone for a few minutes while the girls hugged. Latoya told Xavier that he'd better watch out, because he was looking fine at sixteen and the girls at school were thirsty. He laughed and rolled his eyes, but Arya noticed the way he stared after her friend. She knew he liked Latoya but she also knew that Latoya had a very strict life plan and boys, or girls for that matter, were not on the schedule. A small smile settled on her face as Latoya kissed her cheek and she climbed back into the limo.

Finally, it was just the Herstorys and the driver, who had long ago raised the tinted glass partition between them. The short ride back to their house was ripe with unspoken tension and subtext but no one said a word. The clock on Arya's phone read 11:42. Eighteen minutes to midnight. Her anxiety was causing her blood to run cold, her breathing to become shallow and unsteady. Noticing her stress despite the absolute darkness, Xavier grasped Arya's hand and squeezed it, but she didn't respond. In less than twenty minutes, the actual Devil would show up at their door and take one of them away. The silence was overwhelming. The words unsaid were deafening.

The glass window dividing the driver from them rolled down as the limo stopped. “Here we are, Sir and Ma’ams. I hope you had a great night and please enjoy the rest of your weekend.” He got out of the limo and opened the trunk where the presents were and started to unload. It was nearly embarrassing how many gifts they’d received, of all sizes and wrappings, thought Arya. Though if she were being honest with herself, she’d admit she felt it made her feel special and loved. As the driver brought the last package to the door, he tipped his hat and smiled to the family. “Have a good night!”

A moment later, he was gone, leaving the family standing in the foyer of their house, a single light above them. Arya glanced at the clock on her phone again. 11:49. Eleven minutes.

“So you’re just gonna stand there?” Xavier growled. “Ten minutes until you turn us into freaks and you won’t say anything?”

Xavier’s anger resurfaced as the door closed. Arya just stood between them, unsure of what to say. She sympathized with her brother but knew her mother never meant to hurt them. The silence was worse than the betrayal.

“I don’t know what to say. You know I love you,” Lilith looked from one teen to the other. “You’re my babies. I’ve loved you since I knew you would exist… I don’t know what else I can say.”

Xavier scoffed. “Right.” He took off his jacket. “So what do we do? You said we ascend at midnight. That’s in eight minutes. Do we just stand here? Do we go outside? Do we hide in a bathroom so the world doesn’t see? What?”

Gathering her composure, standing straighter, Lilith smiled warmly at her children. “Let’s go to the garden, to the greenhouse. It’s better to be outside, where the Goddess can see you. She will grant you your gifts under the moonlight.”

Lilith lead the twins straight through the house, opening the door to the backyard. “It doesn’t hurt,” she said softly as they walked into the night. “When the power fills you, it can be electrifying or tingling, sometimes it feels like it’s rippling through you… it is empowering, no pun intended.”

Xavier chuckled humorlessly. “You’d say anything right now.”

Xavier marched ahead of her, opening the greenhouse door and pulling the blue-dyed rabbit’s foot attached to the overhead light, before sitting in the rocking chair their mother had put in years ago. The greenhouse itself

had become more of a storage area than garden and was filled with old chairs, a few broken lamps strewn amongst several tables with plants growing. There were bags of dirt stacked in a corner, one fallen over, having spilt its contents onto the floor.

Trying to catch up to her brother, Arya ran ahead of their mother. She put his hand on his shoulder and sighed. “Xavy, she didn’t do this to hurt us…” Arya’s soft voice seemed to soothe the smoldering rage deep inside Xavier. He sat silently, his arms folded over his chest, but his face had lost some of its anger. Arya glanced at her phone again. “Only two minutes.”

“Right,” their mother said, entering the small building at last. She whispered something that sounded ancient and suddenly the cluttered greenhouse was emptied, the tables covered in soft pads, white sheets and candles surrounded them, floating around them. “Please lay down on the altars.”

Holding hands, Xavier and Arya faced each other. “I love you,” they said together before dropping their hands and climbing onto the makeshift altar. As their heads hit the pillows, Lilith began to chant in that same ancient, foreign language. It was unrecognizable to Arya, who’d taken French and Spanish already. The candles danced in the air around them and suddenly, the french doors to the greenhouse swung open with a gust of wind that blew the candles out.

Darkness washed over them. Only the full moon’s rays lighting the greenhouse. Arya screamed out as some force suppressed her with an unseen weight while Xavier fought to sit up but failed. He tried to speak but his voice was lost to the wind. Arya’s blood pulsed all over her body as her heart raced. She felt as if her skin was crawling with static and Xavier moaned as he felt the same overpowering sensation fill him. Their mother continued chanting as lightening flashed in the clear sky overhead. They heard a boom of thunder while the wind wildly screamed around them. Suddenly she stopped and the wind died down. For a brief moment, all was silent.

The twins were still caught under the weight of invisible pressure as they could feel the power slowly creeping inside of their skin into their blood, through their veins. Arya couldn’t move, barely breathing. Her mind reeling as her fear grew. Xavier was straining against the magic filling him, trying to fight the bonds that prevented him from reaching his sister, whose

terror he could feel as if it was his own. Lilith said nothing, but out of the corner of Xavier's eye, he watched her crouch into a low curtsey as they heard the sound of footsteps echoing off the stone path that lead from the house to where they lay helpless.

"My lovely Lilith, my queen." A deep, unusually accented voice broke the silence. "You may rise."

"My king," their mother's voice was higher than normal, with an inflection they never heard from her. "I present you our children, Xavier and Arya Morningstar."

"Have you finished the ritual? Have they ascended?" His voice was cold, severe.

"Not yet, my king. I…"

"Finish it then. I do not wish to spend more time amongst these filthy mortals than I must."

The candles relit themselves and she began to chant again. Still bound by the weight of the magic seeping into them, Xavier and Arya helplessly stared at the moon, silently praying to be saved.

Moments passed and they could hear Lilith chanting. She placed her hands on their foreheads and called out to the Goddess. At last, a blinding light burst from her hands into her children. Xavier screamed as Arya cried out. Their magical bonds broke and they levitated for a few quick seconds before falling back to the altar, losing consciousness.

"It is done," Lilith said to her estranged husband. "They have ascended."

"Very well. Have them ready for introductions. I will wait in that hovel you call a home." Lucifer walked away before Xavier or Arya woke. Lilith bowed before rising to check on her children. Moving between them, she whispered a few words and they woke.

"Mama!" Arya cried out, grabbing onto her mother and digging her face into her neck. Xavier sat up and patted his sister's back. His face was grim and worried. His mother grabbed him and forced his large body to hunch so she could hug both of her children. Releasing them moments later, she stood up.

"It is time to meet your father."

She helped Arya off the altar, holding both their hands momentarily before Xavier ripped his away. His rage returned and he felt disgusted by

her, repelled by her very touch.

Lilith released Arya's hand and moved to the open doors, "I'll give you two a moment," she said before taking the same path back to the house, disappearing inside.

The twins were frozen in quiet agony. Arya was shaking, her nerves obviously fraying and Xavier was clenching his muscles, holding his fury and fear inside. They met each other's gaze and a tear slid down Arya's face.

"I don't know what I'll do without you," she whispered. "It's always been you and me. I can't go it alone."

Xavier nodded, relaxing enough to pull her into a hug, "I'll always love you and I'll find my way back, to you, to home." They stood in the darkness, illuminated by the moonlight, holding each other. Arya was trembling and afraid while Xavier's arms squeezing her tightly, calming her as much as he could for a few precious moments. Until they heard their mother call them from the back door. "It's time to face the Devil."

"Maybe he'll dance with us," joked Arya weakly, leading the way to the house. She looked up to the clear night sky, where the full moon was surrounded by a thousand tiny sparkling lights. It was her favorite thing about living at the high elevation. The way the stars shimmered as far as the eye could see. She walked slowly, appreciating its ever constant awe-inspiring display.

Xavier took her hand and pulled her towards the house. "Now or never, Ya," he said, putting his hand on the door knob, turning it. "Time to face our destiny."

★★★

The light in the kitchen told the twins where their parents were; the rest of the house was black in the darkness of night. Slowly, the twins matched each other's pace and walked into the same room that had shattered the ideas they'd had of their lives the night before. Lucifer was seated with his back to the entryway, drinking a dark brown liquid, likely whiskey as that's all their mother kept in the house. Lilith stood at the stove, turning the kettle for Arya's tea on. The pot of coffee was nearly finished. Lilith fixed herself a cup and sat at their breakfast table with the King of Hell.

“Well, this is screwed up,” Xavier muttered to himself. Arya couldn’t help but agree and nod. It was very screwed up.

“Have you taught this insolent fool nothing of what is expected?” Lucifer’s tone was cold, causing Arya to shiver. “At least the girl knows better than to speak until she is spoken to.” Xavier’s body clenched as he formed a fist attempting to make his anger.

“No, I have not, “ their mother said defiantly, sipping her coffee, her face neutral. “He grew up as a mortal boy, just as we’d agreed. This is the result.” They spoke as if the twins were somewhere else or couldn’t understand.

“I should never have allowed such a thing. Mortal humans are so vile,” Lucifer swallowed his disgust as he finished his drink. “Girl, pour me another.” Arya froze, her heartbeat threatening to deafen her.

“I’m right here, Dickbag.” Xavier’s words were filled with venom. “I’ll do it.” Xavier stormed into the kitchen, grabbed the glass from Lucifer’s hand and finally looked at the face of his father. The glass fell and shattered on the floor.

“Idiot boy,” Lucifer spat. Lilith quickly muttered a few words and the broken glass was immediately repaired, refilled and on the table in front of Lucifer. “What did you do to make him so stunted?”

This snapped Arya back and she rushed into the kitchen, to her brother’s side, instinctively protective by his look of horror. “Hey! Who do you think you…?” She looked at Lucifer, gasping. It was the man from the diner, the man with her brother’s face. “You…”

Lucifer’s face broke into a menacing smirk, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “Me.”

“You were at the diner yesterday,” Arya backed into the counter. “I saw you… You’re… you’re real?”

“Diner? What do you mean he was at the diner? Is that why you ran?” Xavier asked.

“You promised to stay away until this night,” Lilith growled at Lucifer.

“Even the Devil has to eat, my queen,” Lucifer replied nonchalantly, finishing his drink again. “What should I have done? Skipped over the place that smelled of my children? I did not know they would be there. I wore a glamour, she should not have seen me.”

“She’s special, Lucifer. She’s seen the Shadows since she was small.” Lilith’s voice was strained from concealed anger. Lucifer’s eyebrow rose, his curiosity peaked.

“Really? Even before her ascension?” His voice was warmer, full of interest now. “And to think, I came for the boy,” Lucifer snarled in Xavier’s direction.

“He is remarkably strong and, I am sure, will be quite powerful,” Lilith replied.

“I think not, my queen. The girl is obviously of a higher caliber,” Lucifer smiled coldly at his daughter. “Would you care to be queen, my dear?”

“No,” gasped Xavier and Arya simultaneously.

“Be quiet, Foolish Child,” Lucifer shot at Xavier. “Let me look at you, Girl.” Lucifer lifted his hand and Arya’s body was lifted off the ground, her feet dangling in the air. Slowly spinning her with his finger, he took her measure. “Just like your mother, I see.” Lucifer looked to Xavier. “You may look like me, Boy, but you have a lot to prove before I’d name you my heir.” Fixing his gaze on Arya once more, he sighed. “Oh my Dear, I had no idea how special you were.” Setting her down gently, Arya regained her balance. “The children are dismissed.” Lucifer ordered, his voice cold and detached yet again. “Lilith, you and I have a great deal to discuss. The children have lived in ignorance long enough. It is time they were educated properly.”

Lilith scoffed and shook her head in disbelief. “You can’t be serious. You don’t mean those perverse academies of yours…”

Lucifer looked at the twins again, his dark eyes flashing a bright crimson as he barked at them. “Leave. Now.” Arya took Xavier’s hand and pulled him from the room as fast as she could walk. As soon as he reached the bottom of the stairs, he became the lead, half dragging her while he pulled her up the stairs, not letting go of her hand.

“What do we do? What do we do?” He repeated again and again while he paced his room. He looked at her, bewildered, overwhelmed, stressed . “I don’t know what to do, Arya… what do we do?”

Arya didn’t move or say a word. Her feelings clouding her vision, a storm raging inside her chest. She felt the static on and in her skin again as

she stood there, still and silent, her fear intertwining with her newfound magic.

"Arya, come on, say something!!" Xavier said for the fourth time, still pacing on his blue carpet, still wearing his party shoes.

Arya saw everything around her and she could her brother calling out to her, but she felt as though she couldn't surface from beneath the turbulent ocean of emotions drowning her. She couldn't move, paralyzed, standing in the corner of his room. Xavier reached out. He grasped his sister by both arms, shaking her slightly to snap her out of her trance, but just then, he was flung back into the opposite wall, crashing into his dresser. Arya screamed, her hands flying to her throat.

"I'm so sorry, Xavy! I didn't mean…" she cried, running out and into her own room, slamming and locking the door.

A moment later, Xavier recovered, his body barely aching from the impact. "That was unexpected," he laughed to himself, standing. When he realized Arya was no longer there, he ran to her door and knocked, calling to her, "Ya, it's okay! I'm fine." He knocked again. "Come on, Ya, let me in."

The only reply was muffled cries from the other side of the door. Sighing, he slumped down against her door.

"Ya, I know you didn't mean to do that. I know this is scary, but I promise, you'll be okay. We will be okay."

There was no response from the other side of the door. Instead, Arya was on her bed, crying into her pillow. Her makeup was ruined, her hair a mess. Her dress was wrinkling under her weight but she didn't care. Everything she'd ever known and everything she'd ever dreamed was gone. She, and her life, was falling apart.

★★★

Meanwhile, down in the kitchen, the King of Hell sat with his queen at her breakfast table, admonishing her on ruining his son and praising her for creating such a beauty.

"He is a weak replica of me," Lucifer ridiculed her son in a tone that gave Lilith chills. "But your daughter is quite spectacular. How long has she had the sight?"

“She could always see the Shadows, until I would spell her not to. It disturbed her.” Lilith’s voice was even tempered but hesitant. “She’s not always… stable, Lucifer.”

“If she had been raised with magic, perhaps she might not be so meek,” He replied.

“You don’t know her, Lucifer,” Lilith replied cooly. “She wasn’t ready for the Shadows. She still isn’t.”

“Whose fault is that, my beautiful Lilith?” Lucifer gave her an icy stare. “Nevertheless, I have decided to postpone announcing my heir until they have some sense of what is expected. I want them to be educated by those proud of their Shadow heritage.” He sounded disgusted by Lilith. “How could you turn your back on our world? You?”

“It was the only choice you gave me, if you recall…” Lilith sat, back straight, her face serious and calm. “You and your desire to taunt your God.”

“If He had created you, perhaps you’d understand.” Lucifer scoffed and shook his head. He finished hi whisky again. “They will both enroll in the Academy of Night. They will leave in the morning. The next term starts in a week.”

“Why?” Lilith demanded.

“As you very well know, the Academy is a recent development of mine. I founded it two hundred years ago, created for the sole purpose of educating our young children of the Night. I think it is one of my better… more noble ideas,” Lucifer said, standing, fixing his suit jacket. He sighed. “I knew they would never be ready to command the Greater Demons in Hell and I won’t have my Heir weak and feckless, a target to their hauntings.” He paused, sneering at his wife. “If only you had chosen to teach them our ways, Dear Queen,” Walking toward the entryway, out the way he came in, he paused at the backdoor to the small house. “Have them ready to go by morning. I’ll have one of my minions here to deliver them to the Academy.”

Before she could protest, he opened the back door, disappearing with a loud pop disturbing the quiet of the night. Lilith crumpled to the floor, crying soundlessly and mourning her choices. Upstairs she could hear her son’s frantic pacing, but she could not bring herself to move, to stand, to tell them the news. For her insolence, Lucifer was punishing Lilith but the

Academy meant her children could stay together, at least for a little while longer.

Chapter Four

Arya didn't emerge from her room for hours. When she finally opened her door to face her family, her brother slammed to the floor, having fallen asleep against it. His head hit the ground, but instead of crying out in pain, he laughed. Its sound was so pure to Arya's ears, lifting her spirits.

"Sorry, Xavy!" she giggled at the situation. "I didn't realize you were there." He groaned and used the doorframe to brace himself as he stood.

"You okay?" Xavier asked, looking at her puffy eyes. The light pouring in from the high ceiling windows told the twins that the sun was rising and morning had arrived. "We're still here." He muttered, puzzled.

"I guess maybe neither of us were good enough?" Arya said, hope filling her voice. "He took one look at us and decided to try again in five hundred years." Xavier laughed as they walked down the stairs together.

"Nope, we're absolutely rotten," he replied.

"Or too good? I mean, he is the King of Hell. Rotten is his thing," laughed Arya, pushing her brother ahead of her into the kitchen, whose laughter vanished suddenly. Bumping into his back, she peaked around him. "Mom?"

Lilith sat at the table, clearly exhausted and distraught, staring at an empty coffee cup in front of her, rocking ever so slightly forward and back in her chair. Her hair, usually pinned up carefully, was loose around her face

and shoulder, the wild curls going this way and that. Her eyes, raw and red from crying, looked up at her children in surprise. The hopelessness plain for them to see.

"Mom?" Arya whispered again. "Mommy?"

A smile flickered on Lilith's lips so quickly, Arya thought she imagined it. Xavier crouched down next to his mother, the way he had for Arya during her many breakdowns over the years. He took hold of her face gently in his hands and forced her to look at him.

"Mom? What happened?" He asked in the same soothing tone he used with Arya, who was awed by her brother's love for his family once again.

As if reality was coming into focus, her eyes met his. "Xavy? Arya?" She blinked and shook her head. Seeing the brightened kitchen, she sat up. "What time is it?" she asked, panic in her voice.

"It's only six, Mom, the sun just came up. Arya threw me on the ground to wake me up so we were just going to get breakfast," he explained calmly. Xavier's anger had dissipated sometime during the night. At least, his anger at his mother. "What happened?" He repeated.

"He's taking you both," she whispered so softly only Xavier could hear. He stiffened but did not move.

"What?" Arya called over from the sink where she was filling her tea kettle and the coffee pot with water. Turning off the water, she put the kettle on the stove, turning it on before filling the coffee machine with water and pressing the start button. "What did she say?"

Xavier shook his head. It couldn't be true.

Lilith cleared her throat and repeated, loudly, "he is taking you both."

Xavier gasped. "No!"

She shook her head. "I don't know how this happened. He was supposed to take you. Just you!" Lilith's demeanor shifted suddenly, fury filling her eyes as she shot daggers at Xavier, spitting her desperation at him. "Why did you have to be so rude? He was just supposed to take you!" Lilith threw her face into her hands, muffling the words that came next. "But now he's taking you both… to the Academy."

Xavier sat back stunned, clearly hurt by his mother's words but he didn't say anything, just moving away and standing up. He turned his back on her and grabbed a mug out of the cupboard before pouring himself a cup

of coffee. He wouldn't let her see the tears he was fighting back. Arya was dazed by her mother's toxic words, staring at her in disbelief.

Lilith never favored one child over the other. Let alone blamed them for anything that went wrong in her life, even when it was their fault. Neither said a word or looked at each other. Arya knew Xavier was hurting but she couldn't help him. She'd expected him to be chosen and taken away too, which had been a heartbreaking thought she refused to dwell on. Neither of them had expected this outcome, but Xavier's shock at his mother's resentment caused him to miss what she said next about the Academy.

"And so one of his minions will be here at ten-thirty to take you to the Academy," Lilith finished.

Arya's face reddened with anger at her mother."I am not leaving my school. No matter what the King of Hell has to say. Who is he anyways? DNA? He's not my father. He didn't raise me! H e's not my father!" Arya's voice grew loud and angry. It took a moment for Xavier to realize she was yelling since she never yelled.

"He is your father," Lilith said weakly.

"He is NOT!" She yelled back.

"Arya, this isn't something I can fight," her mother sounded exasperated. "He's the most powerful creature to walk this earth. He was the God's Chosen, His Most Beloved Angel, imbued with the God's own power. I was created human, given gifts of magic from the Goddess, but I was never Her Beloved or Chosen." Arya shrugged, unmoved by her mother's explanation.

"I really don't give a crap, Mom. You should go. It's your fault anyways. I am not leaving my friends or my school. You said it yourself, I'm not special!" Arya cried, tears began to stream down her face and her fists clenched. She was filled with so much rage, it was overwhelming. "I AM STAYING. HERE!"

She screamed, her skin felt like static once again. The room started shaking as her mother was blown back into the wall. It was like Arya's magic exploded from her as her emotions heightened. Arya gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. Xavier stepped towards his mother, instinctively, to shield her. Arya saw this slight movement and fell to the floor, groaning in agony.

“What’s happening to me?” She sobbed into her hands.

Xavier lifted his mother to her feet while she muttered something, the kitchen magically clean of the mess. It was pretty neat, Xavier thought, briefly wondering if he could do the same before focusing on his emotional train-wreck of a twin.

“Whose bright idea was it to give her super powers?” he joked to his mother. His mother didn’t smile, letting out a sad chuckle instead.

He released his mother, who approached her daughter, embracing Arya’s shoulders.

Lilith sighed, kissing her daughter’s hair softly, stroking her back. “You’ve Ascended, my sweet. You both have. You are not merely a witch or warlock, although mythology and pop culture hardly does their true power justice… You are Lucifer’s children, which means your destiny is far greater than you can imagine. You are the culmination of the God and the Goddess’s power. Lucifer is right. You belong at the Academy.”

“What Academy?” Xavier asked, pouring himself another cup of coffee. Life goes on, no matter what’s happening and caffeine is part of life.

“Weren’t you listening?” Arya sniffed, wiping her face. “It’s some demonic boarding school our father has set up to teach us how to be psychopaths!” She began to cry heavily again.

“Not really,” he muttered. “Mom?”

Lilith still sat next to her daughter, rubbing her back. “It is not a place to learn to be psychopaths, or a demonic boarding school, Arya. I’ve known others who have attended, although I didn’t know it was the same your father designed. Anyways, they turned out quite well. Like Nurse Nancy, for instance. She went when she was a young witch. She said it was a well rounded education that taught everything from modern mortal history to spell casting to healing arts and even shape-shifting, if you’re talented enough.”

“Wait, Nurse Nancy’s a witch?” Xavier asked in disbelief.

“No way,” Arya laughed at the absurdity. “She’s so… normal!”

“How do you think she knows where everyone is all the time?” His mother’s eyes twinkled. “There are others you’ll know about sooner or later, but we’ve agreed to keep our children’s magic a secret, allowing them to live mortal lives until they Ascend, like all witches, warlocks and wolves, on midnight of their sixteenth year,” Lilith explained. “It’s something that

happens to all those of magical blood. You both will just be a little more powerful than most."

"A little?" Xavier snorted. "Arya's a tank!"

Arya moaned again. "Powerful? Explosive, you mean!"

She couldn't handle this. She was the bookworm. The girl with anxiety who hated to be alone in her own house. The talentless who couldn't sing or dance or even run without falling down. She panicked whenever her teachers made her speak in public or whenever they had to run the mile. And now she'd just blown both members of her family across a room.

"For now, my sweet girl, but you'll learn to control your magic. You both will," Lilith looked to her son, who was now eating dry cereal from the box. He sat in the very spot Lucifer did the night before, with his feet on the table.

"I haven't done anything… What if I don't have magic?" Xavier asked. He'd been the very definition of angry, sad and scared in the last twenty-four hours, obviously the trigger for his sister's involuntary magical reaction.

"You just haven't tapped into it yet. You will. Sometimes it takes time. Every witch or warlock has a different gift from the Goddess. As you are twice blessed, you should expect anything. Your true talents, your true nature, will reveal itself in time."

"I cannot believe we're having this conversation!" Arya began to laugh. "This is so absurd. We're sixteen! We go to high school. We live in Peak's Village, Colorado! How in the Hell are we the chosen ones?!"

She continued to laugh, causing Xavier to join her. Soon, all three were laughing at their new circumstances. After a few minutes, their laughter died out. Arya stood up, turning to the counter, grabbing her tea and brought it to the table, sitting next to her brother.

"I just don't understand why you waited until the middle of the night before our birthday to tell us the truth," sighed Xavier, throwing another handful of cereal in his mouth.

"Well… To be honest, I enjoyed living like a mortal human and you were so happy as kids. And then…" Lilith's voice faded.

"And then I became a neurotic freak?" Arya said softly, looking into her cup of tea.

“You started to have issues, yes, but you are not a freak,” Lilith replied. “You began to see things, things of the Shadow Realm and I couldn’t bear it so I would spell you and take it from your mind. It just didn’t make sense to tell you until you were old enough to understand…” She paused and opened the refrigerator, pulling out a pack of bacon. “Besides, you have friends who are also witches and warlocks and their parents didn’t want them to know until their sixteenth birthday either. It’s why we are so welcome here in Peak’s Village, we follow the supernatural community rules and live amongst the mortals without them knowing a thing.”

“Yea because you also kept us in the dark. We didn’t know a thing,” Xavier scoffed.

“True, but it is hard enough growing up without the additional burden of knowing all the monsters that go bump in the night are real… and that you’re one of them.” Lilith sighed. “I was just trying to do the best I could. That’s all any parent can do. Supernatural or mortal. I am so sorry, my loves."

“I forgive you,” Arya said quietly. “And I’ll go to the Academy. I’ll learn how to control whatever this is.” She gestured to herself. “I won’t fight it.”

“Fine. If she’s in,” Xavier acquiesced, “I’ll go too.”

“In that case, you’d better get packed. Your transportation will be here in an hour.” Lilith gave both of her children a kiss on the head and whispered I-love-yous into their ears before leaving them alone in the kitchen.

“What if I’m actually crazy?” Arya asked Xavier, as they made their way up the stairs to their room. “Like, what if I’m really having some psychological break and I’m in a padded cell, shaking back and forth and none of this is really happening? What if I’ve lost my mind?”

Xavier squeezed her hand and smiled. “Then we’re both crazy together, Ya. Together in our insanity!”

★ ★ ★

An hour later, three suitcases, two duffles and a pillow case were stuffed with everything Arya could possibly think of. Xavier had packed his gym

bag and backpack, which Arya mocked.

"Did you even pack underwear?" She pointed to his bags, which seemed to be filled with sporting equipment rather than clothes.

"I'm pretty sure as the son of Satan, they'll give me whatever I forgot." Xavier shrugged. Arya supposed he was right but she had sentimental attachment to every item she selected. "Can you even carry all that?"

"Mom said something about minions," she replied, finding another shirt and stuffing it in a bag. "Besides, even if they have clothes, they probably won't have my book collection."

Xavier laughed. "No, they'll have a library like Hogwarts or Game of Thrones, Dummy."

The truth is they were nervous and had no idea what to expect. Lucifer hadn't said so much as twenty words to them, never mind bothered to explain what the academy was, and Lilith didn't seem to have firsthand knowledge, since, according to her, the only person they knew who had gone was an elderly witch.

"Yea, yea, still. I'm taking my copy of Wuthering Heights," she laughed. "And my copies of Harry Potter."

"Yea, cause the magic school won't have books about witches and wizards," he scoffed. "I wonder if they have Playstations or Xboxes? Like, do you think they game at Magic school?" Xavier wondered, throwing their stuff at the bottom of the stairs in the foyer, near the door. "Or do you think they have magic games that are so much cooler?"

"I wonder if they even play anything at all. Too busy trying to teach us not to kill each other. After all, it's a school for Werewolves and Witches, Warlocks and who knows what else?" Arya guessed. "I wonder if there are vampires there."

"It's a school for teenagers, not the undead," Xavier laughed. "Right?" He sounded uncertain.

"Well, I doubt there is actually a sport called Quidditch or whatever," Arya joked back. The fear of having to leave each other had been replaced with the uncertainty of what to expect, which they both felt was easier. Since they knew they'd be together, they were curious and excited despite themselves. "I wonder what hide and seek is like with magic!"

"What if dragons are real?" Xavier challenged.

"What if mermaids are?" Arya guessed.

“Imagine every fairy tale you’ve ever read and it’s all real?” Xavier walked into the kitchen.

Arya followed and shrugged, laughing. “Trolls under bridges? Golden geese?”

“No the eggs were golden, not the geese,” he argued, snorting. Opening the fridge, he grabbed a piece of leftover cake. “Want one?”

“Oooh yea, the corner piece.”

Xavier rolled his eyes, cutting two pieces. “It’s a round cake, Ya.”

“I still want the corner piece. Make it happen, chop chop!” Arya teased, clapping her hands together twice. “I am a Princess now. Serve me, Witch boy!”

The two started laughing so hard they didn’t notice their mother. Lilith was standing in the hallway, watching them eat cake, laugh and joke, just as if nothing had happened. She hid in the shadows, listening to them. Already, Arya was growing much stronger than she expected. She was emotional, always had been, but she was also compassionate and compassion was a sign of strength to the Goddess. She flinched as the doorbell rang.

“It’s fine. This is a good thing,” she said, trying to convince herself as she walked to the door. She opened it to see Chewy standing there smiling. “Chewy? What are you doing here? I’m so sorry. That was rude. We’re just expecting someone. Please, come in.”

“Nothing to be sorry about, Darlin’. I’m who you’re expecting, I suspect,” he replied sheepishly. “Made a deal with the devil long ago and he came a’callin.”

Lilith attempted to hide her disappointment. “Oh. I see.” Pausing to look him up and down, she’d never felt his magic, she thought curiously. “So, you’re a warlock? A Vampire? What?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Ya see, I was born a wolf. An’ I made a deal to keep from triggering my curse in exchange for a favor sometime down the line. Favor came up.”

“Lucifer does love his favors,” Lilith sighed sadly. “I wish you’d told me.”

“To be fair, Doc, I had no idea you were THE Lilith,” he shrugged. “I thought you were just some witch, and that didn’t bother me. You had your little ones and we was friendly. I didn’t know what I was doing when he asked that I keep an eye on y’all. I didn’t remember him asking. Not until

he showed up at the crack of dawn and told me I was to bring his kids to the Academy of Night. I didn't even know that was a thing until he told me. And I had no idea that you and him… that they were… you know." He looked around for the twins. "Anyways, I'm sorry but it's a long drive. Can you call the chillens? We gotta get going."

"Xavier! Arya! It's time!" Lilith called out. She crossed her arms over her chest, staring coldly at Chewy, who had the decency to look ashamed. She muttered something and the bags transformed into two small chests, a dark evergreen and a deep, velvety purple. Chewy picked them up and carried them out the door without another word.

"Mom!" Arya cried, running and launching herself into her mother's arms. Xavier wrapped his arms around them both as they hugged each other for dear life. "I love you, Mommy," Arya sounded like a little girl and her mother started to cry silent tears.

"It's okay, Sweets. Everything will be fine. I'll see you during the Holiday Break at Beltaine," she forced a smile to comfort her children. "And I will come to the Academy on Parent's Weekend, which happens every other month, I've been told. I did a little research while you were packing your things…" Her voice trailed off as she looked from twin to twin. "Xavier, you are going to find your magic in time but until you do, remember you were gifted with extraordinary love. Do not waste it on the wrong person and don't give your trust away lightly, either of you." She kissed her son's cheek.

"Mom," he muttered weakly in protest.

"Arya, my sweet love. You are stronger than you think and this adventure will be the greatest test you've ever taken. You excel at tests. You can excel at this too." She kissed her daughter's forehead and pushed her toward the door. Chewy reentered at that moment.

"What are you doing here?" Xavier asked Chewy, his voice bitter as though he knew the answer.

"I'm your ride." He replied. "Your very own Hogwarts' Express." He looked to Arya who had made him read the series for approval. "Got that right, Sweetie Pie?"

"Too bad you are nothing like Hagrid," Arya whispered bitterly, still holding on to her mother's hand, refusing to let go. Chewy's shoulders sank in shame and he looked like a shell of the man they loved.

“Time to go,” Chewy sadly said. Arya let go of her mother as Chewy wrapped his arm around her back and lead her out the door as she quietly sobbed. Xavier followed, staring at his mother as she closed the door behind him, leaving her alone in their home. The twins were in the car by the time Lilith muttered a few words and with a pop she, too, was gone.

★★★

The drive was long and boring, as neither Herstory was willing to forgive Chewy’s betrayal and indulge him in small talk. Although if Arya was being honest, she had forgiven him already, but she was too sad. She hadn’t been able to say goodbye to her best friend and she didn’t know what to do. Chewy had taken their phones the moment they climbed into the back seat.

“You won’t be needing these at the Academy,” he chuckled, tossing them out the window somewhere off the highway leading into the mountains. “The Academy will teach you better ways to communicate and you won’t want to be talking to those mortal friends of yours anymore. They’re best left in your past. Safer that way,” he continued. “It’s a scary world out there, especially for mortals. Don’t need to be bringing them around magic, you hear me?” He lectured the twins, who weren’t listening.

Instead they stared out the window, watching the only home they’d ever known and the town they loved disappear behind them. They were lost in thought; each in their own cloud of despair. Arya was exhausted and fell asleep sometime during the first hour, but Xavier stayed awake for hours before finally falling into a deep sleep. When they woke, they were still driving, and hours went by. Chewy handed them snacks and drinks to satiate their appetites and stopped occasionally to use the restroom, but they had no clear idea where they were each stop. Falling asleep, eating, waking, stopping for a quick moment became a pattern. Until, finally, long after the sun had risen the next day, they pulled up to black Iron Gates and Chewy pressed a button on an ordinary looking intercom.

“Yes?” Came a feminine voice from the speaker.

“The Morningstar children, Sir… er Ma’am,” Chewy replied nervously. It was obviously his first time there too, wherever there was.

“We’re Herstorys,” Xavier protested. Chewy looked in the rear view mirror, meeting Xavier’s dark, angry eyes.

“Not here, you’re not.”

Arya didn’t say anything while Xavier glared at their favorite diner owner. It was hard to believe that just the other day he was making them milkshakes and asking about school. Now he was kidnapping them for their evil father and taking them away from their mother. She didn’t know how she felt, but her heart was aching in silence.

Finally the gates cracked open slowly, allowing the car to traverse the driveway, which was lined with tall, thick evergreens on both sides, creating a nearly black pathway. Chewy inched the car forward into the darkness slowly, for what felt like ages to the twins. The path ended at a gothic mansion with many towers loomed over them.

“Welcome,” Chewy said in a calm, forlorn voice, “to the Academy.”

Chapter Five

The Academy of Night was located within an old Gothic Victorian style mansion, with many towers added onto the main structure. The building itself was made of stone painted black and the windows were all covered with heavy, black drapes, giving away none of the secrets hidden behind them.

A long staircase lead from the driveway to the double doors that marked the entrance where a friendly looking young woman was waiting. She had rich chestnut hair, light gray eyes and her skin was tanned a lovely copper color, enriched by the black of her dress. She had bold red lipstick that outlined her bright, white smile.

"Welcome to the Academy," she called out to them in a chipper voice.

Xavier glanced at Arya and rolled his eyes. Arya simply clutched her small chest tightly. Xavier could see she was anxious. Her eyes were darting from there to here and back again, discovering everything in between. If there was anyone that would pick up all the small details, it was his sister.

"My name is Madame Dupont and I am your Headmistress."

Xavier looked at her again, closely. Headmistress? This girl couldn't be older than twenty! How in the world was she in charge?

"You must be Xavier and Arya Morningstar, our newest students and the heirs of our King." She quickly bowed and rose again. "Welcome to the

Academy of Night, a place where you are most welcome. Now that you've ascended, of course."

Xavier and Arya climbed the stairs, Arya counting each one.

"Thirty-two," she whispered to herself as they reached the top.

Xavier squeezed her shoulder, carrying his chest one handed. Arya looked back at Chewy, who was standing next to the car, looking sad and unsure of what to do next. She caught his gaze and gave him a small, tight smile. He nodded to her, waved and got back into his car, driving away.

"Oh," she said softly.

"Forget him!" Xavier was still angry at the betrayal, but Arya was too nervous about this new school to be upset at anything other than the last person she knew from before, other than her brother, was gone.

Madame Dupont led them inside, the doors opening the moment she stepped near them. "The Academy will focus your education to create a curriculum unique to your imbued gifts. You can choose to complete your mortal high school requirements while introducing yourself to the magical studies, such as Magical History, Species Origin, Supernatural Creature Studies as well as Spell-casting and Shape-Shifting, among other subjects."

She paused, looking at each one, studying them for a few moments of silence. Cocking her head to the side, she fixed her gaze on Xavier. "I see that you have yet to tap into your magic, Master Morningstar."

"It's Xavier Herstory," he replied bitterly.

She tisked. "Prince Xavier, you will be in the boys' dormitory, on the west side of the grand foyer, where we are now. Younger students in the southwest tower, older students in the northwest. Princess Arya, you are in the East Towers with the other girls. The same applies. Younger children are in the south while the older children, like you, are in the north." Madame Dupont explained as she pointed to the far staircases on either side to indicate the north.

The twins said nothing. Both were looking around, barely listening. Arya noticed two students in matching black uniforms emerge from opposite sides of the grand entrance they were currently in. Their shoes were also black, although the brown haired boy wore loafers while the stunning blonde girl wore stilettos. Arya hoped that wasn't part of the uniform. She could barely walk in normal shoes.

“Master Theo, Mistress Amber, please welcome our newest arrivals. This is Xavier and Arya Morningstar. Lucifer Morningstar’s own children,” Madame Dupont explained, her voice still filled with sweetness. The students bowed at once, rising only when Madame Dupont indicated by slightly raising her hand.

“Welcome to the Academy, Prince Xavier,” the boy called Theo said. “Would you please follow me to our dormitory and I’ll ensure you have everything you need.” He bowed again. Xavier cocked his eyebrow at his sister and she subtly shook her head and shrugged. Everything was different now.

“And, Mistress Arya, if you would follow me, I will do the same for you.” Amber bowed. “We have much to do before the new term starts next week.” “Wait, what kind of school year does this place have?” Xavier asked, rudely.

“Well, we are a full-year boarding school, allowing for visitations from any supernatural friend or family member you may have. Plus every two months, you get to go home for a week,” Amber replied.

“Indeed, terms are thirteen weeks each, four terms a year,” Madame Dupont smiled at the children. “We are about to begin our second term, which begins in the Mortal month of April, although we do not use those dates to keep track. The magical year is divided into thirteen months, each month exactly four weeks. Your ascension and arrival here coincided with Term Break, the two weeks between each term that students are allowed to travel home or stay, depending on what their parents wish.” Madame Dupont walked away from the teens.

“It’s actually a great time to arrive,” Amber said cheerfully. “Better than those midterm arrivals… they are always noticed right away and that can be really overwhelming… and a bit lonely.”

“Be sure to be on time for dinner in the Main Hall,” Madame Dupont called. “Arrive promptly or risk missing your meal.” She then disappeared from view through yet another door.

“Princess Arya, this way please,” Amber repeated, nearly yanking the chest out of Arya’s tight grip. “I’ll explain the expectations the Academy has and what the rules are, how demerits work. What happens if you get too many demerits, et cetera.” Arya followed quietly behind, saying nothing. “The library is off the grand foyer and don’t be fooled by how small it

looks," Amber laughed. "Don't be fooled by how anything looks. Magic likes to do its own thing and changes things every now and then."

Arya still said nothing as they made their way up the large spiral staircase to the east. She glanced back to her brother, who was standing in the same spot he had been, arms folded over his chest as he glowered at the boy sent to help him. Just be nice, Arya thought at him. He glanced up and smirked at her be-nice-smile. Twintuition struck again, his arms dropped and he followed Theo up the staircase to the west.

"Princess Arya, do you have a familiar yet?" The bubbly, blue eyed blonde asked. Arya shook her head. "Oh you'll enjoy that then. Term doesn't start for a week, so if you have permission, we can go off campus and do some shopping together at the Shadow Shops."

Arya smiled. She'd read about familiars before, cats and the like, who did witches biddings. "I'd like that."

"You don't have to be nervous, Princess Arya. We are all at the Academy because your father knew those of us blessed with magic needed to be protected from the mortals. We won't hurt you here," she touched Arya's forearm, sending shivers down Arya's spine. What was that

"Everyone here at the Academy, from the young, un-ascended wolves and immortal children of Vampires to the ascended witches and warlocks," she explained, "is here because Lucifer Morningstar wanted to unite the Supernatural. There are actually twelve other academies, around the world, for people just like us. Once every thirteen years, we come together and…" she paused, taking in Arya's overwhelmed face. "Never mind all that. Here we are!"

"Arya," she interrupted. "Call me Arya."

Amber smiled and opened the large oak door. "Our dorm room, Princess."

As it opened, it revealed a large suite with two double beds on either side of the room, and a full sofa set on an area rug between. Each side of the room had a bathroom and small kitchenette. Arya looked down the hall where another door was and peaked back into the room. The room was larger on the inside than it should have been.

"Magic," Amber laughed, "is an amazing thing."

Placing Arya's chest down on the unowned bed, Amber muttered something under her breath. Suddenly all of Arya's things were neatly

packed in the room, the photos of her friends placed around the mirror in a similar fashion to Amber's own photos.

"That's my best friend, Susie. She goes to another academy," Amber's smile was sad and wistful for a moment before her face broke into a giant grin. "So are you into boys or girls? Our school has all types here, after all, so don't worry about the mortal stodginess against anything like that. We don't care what you are, what species, what color, what gender or who you want to love.

"Just don't be a jerk?" Arya suggested, laughing lightly.

"Pretty much," Amber replied, chuckling.

"That's nice," Arya whispered, sitting awkwardly on the bed that was now hers.

"Yea, it is. So are you seeing anyone? I have a girlfriend here. She's a wolf, so she's on another floor. Her name is Bethany. They assign our rooms until we're eighteen and then we're allowed to choose for ourselves." She rolled her eyes. "But they do know if you have a romantic interest and won't pair couples up, for obvious, dated reasons."

"How?" Arya wondered aloud.

"Magic," sighed Amber. "It has a mind of its own… and it understands intentions… makes it hard to break magical rules."

Arya nodded thoughtfully. She liked Amber already. Her personality was energetic and kind. She was glad they were roommates suddenly. She didn't feel quite so alone, although she wondered how her brother was doing.

★★★

"So this is my side and I'm very territorial, but you are the Prince so I guess you can do what you want," Theo said, his voice losing its friendliness. "We're here at this school because the King himself wanted a place for his precious little Heirs to learn how to control their magic, but from what I can tell, you don't even have any. How are you here? Did you even ascend?" The boy was starting to annoy Xavier, who inhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

Saying nothing, he turned his back on Theo, facing his chest, wondering how to open it. "Oh for crying out loud," Theo said before

muttering to himself. Just as Arya's things had found their way to their places, neatly, so did Xavier's.

"Look, I just found out about all this a couple days ago. So just give me a break, Dude," he replied as calmly as he could. He wondered about Arya's roommate and if she was as nice as this kid. He hoped not. His sister deserved someone kind.

The kid scoffed. "Yea, okay. I'll give a break to the poor little Prince of Hell," Theo snorted. "Rules are simple. Don't mess with anyone. No going into the Girls' dorms or any off limits area. The Main Hall is where we eat and do group classes. You'll get your schedule next week with your classes on them but I can't imagine you'll be in advanced anything," Theo said, looking Xavier up and down.

"Anything else?"

"Mortal classes are in the morning. They will allow you to complete your high school degree. Magic classes in the afternoons and evenings. Meals at seven, noon and six, though there are always snacks available in the kitchens, if you can find them. They move, depending on the day."

"Great," Xavier mumbled. "Where's the gym?"

"Gym? Like the mortal school class or like the mortal way of working out?" Theo paused briefly. "Either way, there are none of those things around. You'll exercise in different ways here. Much harder ways."

"Huh." Xavier grunted. "So no gym…"

"Do you have everything you need for school? There's a week until term and if you need anything, I can take you to the Shadow Shops. They're off campus and you have to portal to them, but it's doable." He sounded as if that would be the most painful experience.

Xavier just shook his head. "I don't know, Dude." Xavier sighed. "I'm going to find my sister." He grunted getting off the bed.

"That's a no-go, Mate. You need to change into your uniform and no entering the girls' dorms, day or night. There's a spell in place to make sure we can't and if you try, you'll get a demerit before term even starts.

"Alright. Where do I get uniforms?" Xavier asked with a strained neutral tone. He didn't like anyone keeping him from checking on his sister.

"Check your dresser, Idiot," Theo replied, his eyes widening in fear. "Sorry, I… I didn't mean that." Theo fled the room, slamming the door behind him.

Xavier sighed. He felt out of place, alone in this strange room. Pulling out a uniform, he changed from his comfortable jeans to the black slacks and shirt. Glancing in the mirror, Xavier smirked. He actually looked like he belonged there, with or without magical powers. Glancing at the clock on the wall in the center of the rooms, he saw that there was a half an hour until dinner hour, so he left the dorm room to explore his new home.

★★★

Leaving his dorm the way he came, Xavier found himself in the large entryway Madame Dupont had referred to as the grand foyer. It was no longer empty, but rather filled with students of all ages making use of comfortable sofas or bean bag chairs. Some were levitating and others were practicing spells. One boy was walking on the ceiling and waved at Xavier as he came down the stairs. Xavier looked up the girls' staircase but didn't see his sister and decided not to try to enter. Not worth risking a demerit, he thought. She'd be down soon for dinner.

Xavier walked around the students, who mostly ignored him. The occasional person would notice and point while whispering into their friend's ear, who would then turn and stare for a moment before returning to whatever it is they were doing.

Wandering around, Xavier went through the door he'd seen Madame Dupont use earlier. It lead to a hallway with doors on either side. He walked a bit down the hall and saw they were classrooms, just like his mortal high school, with desks and whiteboards. There weren't any computers that he could see, no way to contact Luke or Brian or for Arya to contact Latoya. He wondered if they thought the twins just abandoned their friends.

"Master Morningstar, welcome to the Academy of Night," an older man with a blue glittering beard, wearing an oversized, purple knit cap said, bowing as Xavier turned around, startled.

"It's Xavier," he replied. "Thanks."

"Yes, Master Xavier, as you wish," he bowed again. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am the Head Sorcerer of the Academy of Night, Madoc Weatherly." He stood proudly, expecting something that Xavier didn't do. Upon seeing his confusion, "I am the most powerful warlock at the school, and the head teacher for all the magic teachers, including the shape-shifters,

which is usually reserved for an Alpha but I am a skilled shifter in my own right."

If ever a person's behavior could be described as peacocking, it was Madoc Weatherly. He was proud and vain, boasting about things Xavier didn't really understand but concluded was impressive either way.

"Nice to meet you, Mister Weatherly," he replied.

The man chucked. "Oh dear boy, please call me Madoc. I do hope we become fast friends," the old warlock chortled. "I've always been deeply fond of your father, and of course, we are distantly related, as I am one of Lilith's descendants. Much farther down the line than yourself, of course."

Xavier nodded, shifting uncomfortably. A bell tolled and Madoc grinned.

"Time for dinner, dear boy! Please, allow me the great honor of escorting you to the Main Hall for our evening meal. And it would be so very shameful of me if I did not extend the invitation to you and your sister to join me at the Grand Table." Madoc was exuberant, Xavier thought, even his clothes were eccentric. Madoc, in addition to his oversized purple knit cap and glittering blue beard, had chosen to wear a pink-hibiscus-covered-Hawaiian shirt, a green plaid kilt and flip-flops.

"Thanks but I think we'd rather get to know the other students, you know?" Xavier said as kindly as he could while trying not to laugh at the spectacle. Madoc Weatherly nodded, merrily.

"Right, right you are, dear boy!"

Madoc lead the way to the grand foyer, which had cleared out for supper, and through a set of french doors. The Main Hall was bigger than any room Xavier had ever seen. It seemed like an impossible task to find his sister in this crowd, which was easily over a thousand strong. From the small children to the adults, there seemed to be every age group there. It reminded Xavier of those old sci-fi movies about the end of the world and the bunkers that housed everyone.

"This is where I leave you, dear boy," Madoc said with a sweeping bow. "But I shall see you again soon," he winked as he turned away. Xavier didn't know what to make of him one bit.

"XAVY!!!" He heard Arya's voice call from across the room. He looked to see her surrounded by other students, her face flushed but happy.

He made his way to her, squeezing between the tables and students moving from table to table.

"Xavy, you're here. Okay, okay… Watch this," Arya said before she mumbled something and the table grew a little larger, with a chair appearing next to Arya's. "Amber showed me that! How cool, huh?! Okay okay. Sit down, Xavy!"

She was absolutely glowing, Xavier thought, happier than he'd ever seen her.

"Hey, Sis. Everything good?" He said, sitting next to her, his stomach growling. She nodded, opening her mouth to answer when the lights dimmed and Madame Dupont was lit up at the far end of the room, smiling.

"Good Evening, students of the academy," she said smoothly, her voice somehow carrying out to the far corners of the room, despite the lack of a microphone. "Term starts in a little over a week, so I won't go over any start of term announcements quite yet. However, a happy reminder that you are to stay out of the Forbidden Areas of the school. If you are a shape-shifter or a wolf, please remember you are only to transform in the Forest to the North. Witches and Warlocks who need to practice spell casting, you may use the forest to the south."

She paused, her eyes flickering towards the twins. "We also have the extreme honor of being the Academy chosen for our King's own children, Prince Xavier and Princess Arya Morningstar. Please remember they are not simply students, but your future King or Queen so treat them accordingly."

She smiled and bowed towards the twins. Arya turned bright red and Xavier groaned to himself, sinking in his seat. So much for a low profile, he thought.

"Now, I am sure you are all very hungry, so let's eat!" With those words, each student was magically served. "Your favorite meals to help you feel at home," Madame Dupont smiled, waved her hands and the lights brightened again.

In front of Xavier was a burger with everything on it, fries and onion rings and a large glass of what looked like Dr Pepper. Arya had a plate of eggs Benedict and a large strawberry milkshake. She tasted it and her eyes lit up.

"It tastes just like Chewy's," she gasped, sipping some more. Xavier's mood darkened momentarily at Chewy's name but then took a bite of his

burger and his spirits were renewed.

"Wow, that's awesome. Just like that place in Vancouver from our vacation last year!" He exclaimed. "That was the best burger of my life and it tastes exactly the same."

Amber and the other girls at the table had been watching them. She laughed gently. "That's magic," Amber explained. "It's full of wonder."

Xavier noticed the girls staring and elbowed Arya, who looked up from her meal at last. "Oh, sorry, Xavy, you remember Amber? Next to her is Bethany, her girlfriend. She's a wolf, I guess. Shuri is next to her and she's an immortal, like Meg," Arya said, pointing first to a cute Asian-American girl with long purple hair done up in a messy bun, then to a beautiful black girl with rich russet skin and hair plaited in large braids and finally to a mousy, pale brunette. "And I'm so sorry, but I've forgotten your names," Arya blushed at the other three identical looking girls, who didn't smile.

"We are the Lastranges. I am Caliope. This is Clarissa and that is Claire," the one closest to Xavier said. The girls all had light grey eyes, delicate features with seemingly flawless creamy dark skin and long hair styled in several intertwining braids that formed a bun at the back of each of their heads. "We are Charmed," she finally smiled, referencing the television show that had been popular once upon a time.

Arya laughed, "I used to watch that. Both versions."

"It's a joke, but we really are. Together we are stronger. Our power comes from our sisterhood." Claire replied. "You'll see…"

"We're among the top students here at the Academy, but I suspect you and your brother will surpass us quite quickly." The one called Clarissa said.

Claire nodded. "As Morningstar's children, I can only imagine how powerful you'll be once you tap into your magic."

Xavier shifted uncomfortably, while Arya nodded, saying, "I have to learn to control mine. I keep accidentally throwing people when I'm upset."

"Happened to us." The Lastrange sisters said in unison, nodding.

"It was worse when we were all upset together, of course," Caliope replied.

Shuri, who'd finished eating, smiled over at Xavier. "So what's your power, Hot Stuff?"

"SHURI!" gasped Bethany, her hands to her mouth.

“No idea,” Xavier chuckled awkwardly.

The girls attempted to hide their momentary shock at how unusual it was to show up at the Academy without knowing at least some magic. “My mother said it would come in time.”

“Your mother is Lilith, right? Like the REAL Lilith?” The short mousy haired brunette named Meg asked. “It’s so weird that she’s still alive, having kids that are my age! I mean, she’s our ancestor.”

“Nearly all of us are her descendants,” Amber explained. “Anyone who is a witch or warlock, anyone with wolf blood. The immortal offspring of Vampire-Human couplings are also Lilith’s descendants.”

“I didn’t realize we had so much family,” Arya said softly.

“Yea, well… We don’t really think of each other as family, although we are the same way mortals are,” Bethany replied. “It would be too weird, especially where dating is concerned!” Amber and Bethany leaned together, laughing. “Besides, it’s so very distant at this point for most of us.”

“Yea, I mean aside from the bastard Morningstars, you’re probably not even genetically related to any of us anymore,” Shuri said, stealing some of Meg’s fries. “I mean, biologically.”

“Wait, what?” Xavier asked. The girls all glanced at Shuri, glowering at her.

She bit her lip, looking slightly embarrassed before she continued. “Sorry… yea, Lucifer has like three other kids at this school, I think. They are born from mortal mothers, and since they show up here as soon as they’re born, I don’t think it ended up well for those women.”

“Are there any here now?” He asked, hoping his voice didn’t sound as eager as he was. He’d always wanted a little brother or sister. No offense to Arya, he thought.

“Well, yes, you have an older sister somewhere,” Amber replied, shrugging sheepishly, “but she doesn’t want to meet you. Madame Dupont asked her to meet you this morning and she refused. It’s why you’re not rooming with her, Princess. You also have a younger brother and I can’t remember who the other one is. Sorry.”

Shuri looked around and mumbled something about being right back. A moment later she returned with a small boy, with the same dark eyes and hair, bronzed olive skin as Xavier. “This is Clifton,” she introduced the boy,

“he’s eight and very smart. Clifton, this is your brother and sister, Prince and Princess Morningstar.”

The boy bowed, looking frightened. “Hello, Prince and Princess.”

“It’s Arya and Xavier,” Arya said, getting up and kneeling in front of the boy. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Cliff. Can I call you Cliff?” Arya smiled as the boy nodded. “I am your big sister and you may call me Arya or Ya, like Xavy does.”

The boy glanced from twin to twin and back to where he’d come from.

“Hey, Cliff, I’m Xavy and if you ever need anything, just come find us,” Xavier said. The boy nodded, again looking behind him. “Go on, kiddo. You can find us when you want.” The boy ran off, with Arya and Xavier watching. “We have other siblings.”

Arya leaned against him. “I can’t believe how much we didn’t know.”

“You guys better finish eating. Everything magically cleans itself at exactly seven and it’s five til,” one of the Lastrange sisters said.

The others had already cleared their plates and most of the group had gone in search of friends, leaving only Amber and Bethany and the remaining Lastrange sister that neither twin could positively identify.

Sitting back down, Xavier inhaled his food without tasting, his mind wandering while Arya picked at hers, searching the room for Clifton. Finishing her milkshake, she sighed, content in that moment. She was glad there was almost a week for her to find out more about this strange place, and all of these people, before classes were set to begin.

“Tomorrow, do you want to go to the Shadow Shops?” Amber invited the twins. “I was telling Arya that she should get a familiar and you should too. Familiars help us connect to our magic.”

“Yea, sure. Sounds like something I’d be down for,” Xavier replied.

The twins were barely able to finish their food before, like they were told, the tables were magically cleaned, emptied of everything on them. Arya yawned and hugged her brother. She was too tired to explore the grounds, so she said good night and followed Amber to their dorm. Xavier yawned and decided he was ready for bed too.

Chapter Six

The next morning, Arya momentarily forgot where she was. Wrapped in her favorite comforter, using her favorite pillow, she snuggled into her stuffed wolf she affectionately called Lupine. Hearing muffled movement across the room, she opened her eyes and memories from the past three days flooded her mind, remembering where she was. Amber was tip-toeing into her bathroom, trying not to wake her sleeping roommate.

"Hi," Arya yawned, causing Amber to jump and clutch her hand to her chest.

"Oh my Goddess, you scared me!" Amber gasped, laughing. "How'd you sleep on your first night here?" "Great. I felt like I was in my own bed," Arya sat up and looked around. "What time is it? I'm starving."

"Six-something, I think. I was about to shower and get ready for breakfast. You should do the same," her roommate replied, closing the bathroom door behind her.

"Yea, maybe I should," Arya whispered to herself, scooting to the side of the bed, throwing her legs over and standing up. She went to the dresser and pulled out a fresh uniform and her other necessities, before walking to the bathroom on her side of the room. Closing the door behind her, she turned around to see the all of her bathroom items, her makeup, haircare products, all of it, neatly organized. "Magic is so cool," she said aloud.

After a quick shower followed by blowing dry her hair, Arya put on a touch of eyeliner and mascara. Looking in the mirror, she smiled at her reflection. Then Arya stepped out of the bathroom, ready to tackle the day.

"I really do love your hair," Amber said wistfully from the small shared sitting area where she'd been waiting. "So red and shiny. Like the cartoon little Mermaid but real." She paused, "but you do know you can instantly dry it though, right?"

Arya shrugged. "Didn't think about it. We should get going down to the Main Hall. I'm starved." Arya was famished and she desperately wanted to find her brother, or brothers as the case was now.

"They won't let us in for another five minutes, but I do have something to show you, if you wouldn't mind a detour."

"Sure." Arya nodded and the two girls left the dorm room quickly.

Amber led the way. "So, you already know that the whole reason this school exists is because of Lucifer Morningstar wanting to find a place for all his Nephilim children like two hundred years ago. Which is, like way late if you ask me, but I guess he noticed mortals weren't getting dumber and decided we needed a fair shake," Amber explained, nervously laughing as she spoke.

"Nephilim, like half angel, half human?" Arya interrupted. Cliff was a Nephilim, she realized.

"Well, yes, but specifically humans as a result of the offspring of Adam and Eve, not Adam and Lilith. Lucifer has only ever had a child with one witch, the Original Witch," Amber explained.

"My mother," Arya said softly.

Amber nodded. "Nephilim are unable to perform magic but they do have healing abilities and when they ascend, it's said they get angel wings and are able to cast away demons, among other angelic powers. The reason they need a place before they ascend is because every Nephilim born killed their mother on their way out," She paused. "At least that's the story. There are thirteen academies set up across the world, but the Academy of Night is the first and the original."

Amber lead Arya past the Main Hall and through a small corridor Arya hadn't noticed before. "As there were so many Children of the Night, Lucifer, as our King, felt it was his duty to provide his children and all the Night Children with a safe haven." They stopped at a door without any

inscription. Amber looked from the door to Arya and explained. “This is the Living History room. I wanted you to see where it is so you can come back later. Madame Dupont teaches Magical History here,” she said as casually as she could.

“Living History?” Arya asked, her interest peaked.

“If you go inside, it’ll show you what was as if it was happening now.” Amber pulled her ponytail out and remade it. “It’s like those virtual reality games… only no machines required… and you can’t play with anything. So I guess it’s more like a virtual movie.” She paused. “Anyways, we should be able to get breakfast now. Let’s go.”

Arya’s gaze lingered on the room’s door, while following her new friend.

★★★

“Get up, Prince Charming,” Xavier heard from a distant place. He was with his friends, Luke and Brian, having fries at the diner and talking about girls. “Come on, we’re going to miss breakfast!” The voice said again. I’m already eating fries, Xavier thought, why would I want breakfast. Suddenly, something shook him and he was ripped from the diner into an unfamiliar room with an irritated face he barely recognized staring down at him.

“If you make me miss breakfast,” the boy he recalled was named Theo growled at him. Theo’s face was filled with indignation and hostility Xavier didn’t understand.

“What? You’ll turn me into a toad?” Xavier laughed. He always laughed when someone was angry at him. He didn’t know why, but he always did.

Theo didn’t smile and turned around, huffing to himself. “I’ll wait while you get ready, but you better hurry up. It’s already quarter-til.” Theo sat, arms crossed on his chest, legs rapidly moving up and down impatiently. “GO!”

“Yea, yea, I’m going,” Xavier got up, grabbed a clean uniform and went into his bathroom, winking at the very irritated Theo, who actively seemed to hate him. A first for him. Xavier had never even had someone not like him, let alone hate him. Closing the bathroom door, he turned to find everything he needed from home. “Now I know I didn’t pack this,” he

laughed as he grabbed his giant rubber ducky wearing a rain hat. Still, he was glad it was there. It helped remind him of home. “Thanks, Mom,” he whispered to himself. He could almost see her smile, if he closed his eyes.

Hopping in the shower, Xavier’s mind went to the routine place and he started to sing like he always did. He sang a song his mother taught him as a little boy, a Celtic ditty about a drunken sailor. It had always made him laugh when he was upset as a child. He washed his hair and body, singing the song. He only stopped singing to brush his teeth. He looked at himself, staring into his own eyes. Xavier knew he was handsome in the same way that Arya didn’t realize she was beautiful. He was aware of the way girls looked at him, the way they hung around Arya even though she barely spoke to them.

Just then, Xavier remembered Latoya and his heart ached just a little. The only girl he’d ever really liked and he’d never see her again, not that she’d ever been interested in him. Even at his party she’d made it clear she was dancing with him because it was his birthday, not because she wanted him. He shook the thought off, forcing a smile at his reflection. Who knows, he thought, maybe there would be someone here for him, someone just as beautiful, smart and funny as the girl he’d never stood a chance with. Shrugging and winking at himself in the mirror, Xavier put on his mask of confidence and exited the room.

Theo was still sitting in the same spot, still visibly annoyed with Xavier. He got up without a word and stood by the door. Xavier sat on his bed, gingerly putting his socks on first and then his shoes, slowly tying them. Theo was fuming and tapping his foot, his anger rippling off him like waves. Xavier could feel the heated fury as he moved past Theo.

“Alright, I’m ready. Let’s go,” said Xavier at last.

Theo walked quickly through the open door, down the hall and stairs forcing Xavier to jog to keep up. If one thing was already certain, Xavier thought, there was no making friends with Theo. Entering the Main Hall together, Theo abandoned Xavier and quickly disappearing into the crowd, leaving Xavier standing alone at the door.

Xavier looked to where his sister had been the evening before but didn’t see her. Standing up on the balls of his feet, he searched for her in the crowd, feeling like a loser momentarily. A tug on his pant leg caused him to look down and see his younger self staring up at him.

“You can sit with me, Master Morningstar, Sir,” his younger self said.

“That would be really nice, Cliff,” Xavier smiled, crouching down to eye level for the boy. “Have you seen our sister?”

“Which one?” Clifton asked, his face curious.

“My twin, but do you know our older sister too?” Xavier asked.

“Well, yea but she said not to introduce you, no matter what.” Cliff’s voice squeaked as he stated the command from their older, unknown sister. “But we have another sister too.”

“Who is that?” Xavier tried not too earnest but he never understood why kids couldn’t just give you all the information without being so all over the place.

“Gwen. She’s just a baby. I play with her in the nursery wing on Sundays. That’s the only time I’m allowed in,” the boy said sadly.

“Well, why don’t we see if we can’t go see her later, after we find Arya? I hear today is a free day,” Xavier replied, patting the boy’s shoulder. Cliff nodded, happily. “And please, stop calling me Master Morningstar. I’m Xavy, your brother.”

“Okay, Ma…. Xavy.”

Xavier smiled, standing up. “Well, I’m hungry. You?” Cliff nodded and grabbed Xavier’s hand, leading him through the crowd to a table filled with other eight year old boys.

“You can sit with us, Xavy,” his young brother said. “These are my friends. They’re all wolves except Pete,” a redheaded boy waved nervously to Xavier. “Pete’s an Immortal but he hasn’t matured yet, so he’s still growing.” Xavier shook his head, not understanding half the conversation and waved hello.

“XAVY!” Xavier turned to see his sister, running through the crowd towards him. Finally reaching him, she laughed, panting, “Good thing you’re so tall. It was easy to find you!” Looking at his company, she saw her new brother and immediately hugged him. “Good morning, Cliff!” He blushed the same way Xavier did when he was embarrassed, his cheeks darkening. “Sorry,” she whispered to him, kissing his cheek.

“We’re just about to eat. Care to join?” Xavier motioned to the pile of breakfast pastries in the middle of the table. Arya shook her head, her hair going wild as usual.

“I already did, but Xavy, there’s something we need to see,” she said, quietly.

“You mean, our baby sister?” Arya’s eagerness vanished. “So not that,” he said, noticing her change of attitude.

“Our baby sister?” Her shock passed quickly and a smile replaced it. “Okay, what I have can wait. When can we meet her?”

“After I eat. Meet me in the grand foyer after breakfast. I’ll bring Cliff here too.” Cliff’s face lit up.

“Sounds great,” Arya replied. “I do want to explore the library for a bit anyways, so I’ll meet you in twenty minutes.” She hugged Xavier and Cliff again, causing the other boys to laugh as Cliff blushed, grinning. “See you in a bit, Brothers.” Xavier stared after her as she quickly made her way out of the Main Hall.

“She’s so cool,” one of the boys whispered. “So pretty,” said another.

“That’s my sister,” Cliff said proudly. “She’s going to be as powerful as the Goddess one day, just watch.”

Xavier smiled and grabbed a large Apple Danish, stuffing half of it into his mouth. Cliff did the same and looked up at his brother, who rewarded him with a smile and a hand on the head, ruffling his hair. Cliff laughed, pushing Xavier’s hand away. How strange that things felt comfortable so quickly between the brothers. How strange that everything had seemed lost to an uncontrollable fate and now, now he had more family and more hope for the future than he’d ever had before.

★★★

The twins were not expecting the grandiosity of the Nursery when they followed Cliff through the twisting and winding halls to meet their baby sister. The Nursery was set up in a Ball Room, with high vaulted ceilings, incredibly large windows allowing natural light to fill the room, patterned gold shimmering wallpaper between them. There were twenty cribs, evenly spaced out with rocking chairs and changing tables between them, with a large play area for babies to crawl around in the center.

“Why are there so many babies here?” Arya whispered to Xavier, who shrugged. Just then a pale, ethereal woman glided over, bowing and smiling.

“Most of these babies are orphaned or the children of vampires. We have about sixteen vampiric children, three orphaned wolves and one Nephilim, obviously.” Her voice was pure honey and her beautiful face stunned Xavier into silence. Her delicate features and blue eyes, blond hair made him think of angel, although that somehow felt wrong.

“You’re a vampire,” Arya said, amazed. The woman nodded, her compelling smile blinding Xavier from all thought.

“I am, Princess. I am Nanny Mary Blackwood, the head caregiver of all preschool aged children of the Academy for the last two hundred years or so,” Mary Blackwood was clearly humble and well-suited for her position, for as soon as one child cried, she’d glide over, scooping them up, whispering sweet nothings into their ears, calming them instantly. Arya glanced around the room at the variety of nannies. She noticed most avoided eye contact with her but a dark haired girl with reddish-brown skin stared with intensity.

“Nanny Mary? Who is that girl? The one in the corner?” Arya asked, turning her head so the girl couldn’t see her lips move. Nanny Mary didn’t even look over, to her credit.

“That is another Nephilim, although she is not of your blood, she is another Archangel’s offspring and has never met her father. Her name is Zaya and she has no other family that we know of, but she is incredibly skilled with babies and took care of young Master Clifton, as well as many other of Lucifer’s children that have found themselves with the misfortune of losing their mothers.” Arya processed this new information with awe. Angels were real and they have come to earth, she realized.

“So the baby near her is…” Xavier said, glancing in the direction of Zaya briefly.

“Your half-sister, Miss Gwendolyn,” The Head Nanny replied, “please go make your introductions, I really must get back to my other charges. It’s nearly snack time.”

The Trio made their way across the large room with Cliff marching ahead. He was very excited to see his baby sister, his only family, other than the mystery sister, until the twins had arrived.

“Hello, Zaya!” Cliff greeted the Nephilim. Her dark eyes sparkled when she smiled at the boy hugging her side. Her friendliness vanished when she looked up at the twins.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Zaya,” Arya said, extending her hand to the strange girl. “I am Arya and this is my brother, Xavier. We’re new here, but we heard you take care of our sister, so thank you.”

Zaya sniffed in response but said nothing, not taking her hand. Arya glanced at Xavier, who gave her a small shrug that went unnoticed by Zaya and dropped her hand to her side.

“Zaya is the best,” Cliff gushed, hugging her hip. “She taught me how to tap into my angelic nature before Year One. She also tells me stories about my other siblings she’s taken care of. Plus she gives me extra chocolate if I make Baby Gwen happy!”

“Sweet Master Clifton, do you want to see your sister or continue to waste your precious time talking about me?” Zaya replied with a thick accent Arya couldn’t identify.

“Oops,” Cliff laughed, grabbing Xavier’s left and Arya’s right hands and pulling them over to the crib. “This is our little sister, Gwen. She’s six months old!”

Inside the crib was the most beautiful baby Arya had ever seen, with large, deep chestnut eyes, dark chocolate hair and warm olive skin. A large toothless smile broke out on the living doll’s face, love bursting from Arya’s heart instantly. She reached in, carefully picking Gwen up.

“Hello, Princess,” Arya whispered, “I’m your sister.”

“She’s not a princess,” Zaya interrupted, unhappy and annoyed. “She is a bastard.” Xavier snorted. Arya looked up in surprise.

“She may not be a princess but she’s my sister and I’ll call her what I want.” Arya's sugary voice matched her smile, attempting not to argue with this stranger.

“Half-sister,” Zaya said again in the same tone. Arya’s patience was diminishing quickly. The Nephilim was hovering with a mistrustful expression, unwilling to allow Arya a moment alone with her sister.

“Yes, that’s true, but my sister all the same,” Arya said in a cold tone.

“You’re not witch, not Nephilim. Princess of Hell, not one of us though,” Zaya replied, irritated. Before Arya could respond, Nanny Mary came gliding over.

“Zaya? Arya?” Cliff asked, clearly picking up on the tension between the two. Xavier wrapped his hand around his shoulder and guided him away from the scene, shooting a look at his sister that plainly read ‘Stop this.’

“Zaya, why don’t you take a break for a few moments? I’ll keep my eyes on your charge and you can get some air.” Nanny Mary perfectly defused the situation just as Arya could feel her magic prickling, desperate to escape her body. Nanny Mary looked Arya in the eyes, “Zaya is simply protective of Nephilim offspring. You see, she was born during a time when Nephilim were seen as abominations. For her, nothing is more important than keeping her charges safe.” The vampire nanny somehow calmed Arya completely; her magic tucking itself back where it came, somewhere deep inside her body. “Of course, we have done our best to heal her old wounds. She is triggered by your lack of,” Mary paused, trying to find the right word, “understanding.”

“My understanding? I just found out that my father is the literal Devil and my mother was the first woman on earth, also the first witch, making me some sort of supernatural freak.” Arya sighed heavily. “Not to mention siblings I never expected and now… I… How am I supposed to fit into a world I know nothing about?”

Mary smiled, gently gesturing to baby Gwen. “The same way she will, by learning about the world as it is.” Arya looked down at the precious angel child in her arms and felt that love burst forth again.

“Zaya will adapt, but as she is several hundred years old, she will need time and patience on your part.” Mary waved toward the rocking chair. “Why don’t you sit with your sister and rock her for a few moments? It will help you bond.”

Mary glided away just as Arya sat in the wooden chair. Staring down at the baby in her arms, she began to hum a lullaby, to which she couldn’t remember the words. Baby Gwen smiled up at her, stretching her chubby little arms and wrapping her whole hand around Arya’s thumb. She rocked back and forth humming, lost in the little one’s big brown eyes.

“My turn, hey?” Xavier said, breaking her concentration and causing Gwen to transfer her gaze to him, throwing her arms up to be held by him.

“She likes you already,” Arya said in awe.

“Maybe it’s because you look just like him” Cliff said, his eyes widening as he waited for Xavier’s reaction. Arya noticed that Cliff didn’t speak about their father much and seemed almost afraid to at all.

“Relax, little dude. I knew this already. I met him, remember?” Cliff nodded and spotted Zaya through a window.

“I’ll be back!” He ran from the room, seemingly faster than a typical eight-year-old should. Maybe speed was an angelic power, Arya wondered.

“Okay, now give me that baby,” Xavier said, giving his attention to Gwen, who squealed in delight. “Who wants to be tickled?!” He exclaimed, ignoring Arya and the room as he settled on the floor with the baby in his lap.

Arya began to wander from crib to crib, smiling at the babies inside and their caregivers. After she’d seen the last baby, she walked quietly over to where Mary was holding a sleeping baby, nursing a bottle.

“Nanny Mary, may I ask you something?” She began nervously. Mary nodded and she continued. “How is it that vampires can have children?” Mary’s smile turned sad, and she placed the sleeping bundle into the empty crib nearby. Wrapping her arm around Arya’s shoulders, Mary led her to a corner with a small sitting table and a pot of tea waiting.

“Only male vampires can procreate. Just as only male angels can create Nephilim, only vampires can create vampiric children. I am unable to have my own child as a vampire, but a male vampire does not need to carry a child and as long as he is feeding regularly, he can create an offspring when he mates with a human, if he does not use protection,” she explained.

“What happens to the mothers?” Arya asked, looking directly at Mary, who kept her eyes focused on the room around them.

“Most of them die. Those that don’t are often compelled to forget their child or to think their child died at birth. They are ill-suited for raising a vampire child as they are mortal and weak. Vampire children are quite strong, even as newborns. They grow very quickly and live extraordinarily long lives, although not quite so long as their fathers. They have self-healing abilities, usually, although rare, some are born without these unique abilities and are more human than vampire. They are usually sent away from the Academy before they are old enough to remember the supernatural.”

“And the Nephilim, their mothers all die?” Arya sipped her tea, not taking her eyes off her newest teacher.

“Sadly, yes. Nephilim take only three days to gestate before they are born and the process is incredibly difficult on mortal women, usually killing them before the baby is even born. It’s very sad, really, because the

Nephilim child then must rip itself out of its mother's womb or risk dying with her." Mary finally looked Arya in the eyes, her face solemn.

"That's awful…" Arya whispered. "I feel so guilty to have my mother still."

"Princess, may I be frank with you?" Mary asked.

"Of course, Nanny Mary," she replied, "but please, call me Arya. I am very uncomfortable being called princess all the time."

"You are not Nephilim, as Zaya said, nor are you witch. You are both and more. Your mother lives as she will never die. Your father is an Archangel, however he fell, and you are the Princess of all Supernatural Creatures, whether you want to be or not. All of this is true…" She paused, sipping her own cup of tea. "But you must also know that, in the end, Zaya will do whatever it takes to protect her charges, the Nephilim, especially against you." Mary placed her cup down as Arya's eyebrows scrunched up in confusion.

"Against me? I would never hurt my siblings," she protested, puzzled. "Xavier and I have always wanted more family, it was always just us and our mother growing up…" her voice trailed off.

"There is much you will learn, Princess. Much you will be forced to accept about yourself, your brother, your mother and your father. Dark and dangerous deeds are in your future here at the Academy and in Hell," the Matronly woman whispered, gazing at Xavier holding Gwen. "For you both."

Xavier didn't know what happened between Arya and the Head Nanny but whatever it was, it left her quieter and sadder than she'd been since arriving. He had tried to ask her about it but she had just shrugged and muttered something about going back to her room to sleep. Xavier watched her leave. After that he and Cliff began wandering the halls of the Academy. Cliff seemed to be warming up to Xavier with each passing moment.

"I'm hungry," Cliff said as she walked away. "Let's go see if we can find some snacks in the kitchen!" Xavier followed his brother, answering questions about his favorite color and sport, what movies he liked to watch, which supernatural creature was the coolest to him. By the time they found the kitchen, Cliff seemed to have asked every question Xavier had ever been asked about himself and more.

“Master Clifton, you know you are not supposed to be down here,” said a portly man with dark skin, wearing a stained apron and covered in flour.

“But I’m hungry, Mister Gingerman, and everyone knows you have the best snacks anyone could ever conjure,” Cliff said with enthusiasm.

The man chuckled before turning his attention to Xavier, quickly bowing. “My apologies, Prince Xavier,” he said, with his head and back still bent at an awkward angle.

“Whatever, it’s fine. Please get up,” Xavier replied, still wildly uncomfortable by displays of royal respect.

“Yes, your Highness,” he said, standing upright again. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Greywolf Gingerman,” he chortled. “As you can guess, I am a werewolf but I am also the head chef of the Academy and create most of the dishes you and your classmates gobble up each day.”

“Very cool,” Xavier replied. “I like to cook sometimes. My Uncle Chewy has this diner and sometimes, if they’re not too busy, Chewy lets me cook with him…” His voice faded as he remembered the betrayal on he felt when he saw Chewy standing at the door of his house the day they left.

“You are welcome to take a one-on-one class with me to continue your cooking lessons, if you wish, Prince Xavier. Simply allow your Guidance Counselor know when you meet with them and they’ll find room in your schedule.” Greywolf grinned, “I could always use more help in the kitchen.” Turning his attention to the younger boy, Greywolf crouched down to become eye-level with Clifton. “So you’re hungry… what shall we whip up to please you?”

“Do you have any of your triple chocolate brownies?” Cliff asked, eagerly.

“I thought chocolate was bad for dogs,” Xavier said without thinking. Someone growled behind him. “Sorry, I just mean, the whole wolf thing… I’m sorry.” He looked around and bowed his head ashamed.

“No, it’s fine,” Greywolf said. “It is sometimes difficult for us to remember that there are some who have no understanding of our world until they ascend. I understand. To us, you are the Prince of Hell, but to you, we’re just strangers, strange creatures. I understand,” he repeated, patting Xavier’s arm. “As it were, no. Werewolves are not allergic to chocolate or

frozen grapes, like dogs. We have all the same immunities as any supernatural from mortal poisons."

"I'm sorry," Xavier said again, still blushing with embarrassment. "I really don't know anything. My sister's the one that reads about all of this for fun." He was still feeling guilty, realizing he'd crossed a line in his ignorance. Someone else growled from across the room.

"He said he was sorry! Don't be mean!" Cliff said angrily. His eyes changed to a deep red and he seemed to grow with his anger.

"Calm down, Master Clifton! Before you are sent to detention!" Greywolf commanded. Instantly, Cliff's face returned to normal. "None of us are angry with the Prince. Or offended," Greywolf's voice left no room for discussion and the other cooks returned to their tasks, leaving the three to talk in relative privacy.

"I really am sorry!" Xavier repeated. He felt as ashamed as if he'd used a slur. "I honestly didn't mean to insult any of you."

"As I just said, we aren't offended. You have a great deal about our world to learn," Greywolf replied. "Your mother was only thinking of how to protect you from some very painful realities by raising you with mortals. I met her a few times, you know…"

Xavier perked up and he grinned. "You knew my mother?"

"Well, as well as anyone can know someone that's been around forever. She's one of a kind, your mother." Greywolf sounded wistful.

Xavier guessed he must have fallen in love with her, like he'd seen so many men do over his life, yet his mother had never once given them any real thought. Her children and her job were her life. His heart ached as he missed her deeply in that moment.

"I'll tell her you said hi," Xavier said, quickly changing the subject. "So who is my counselor, do you know?"

"Ah, let me see… Morningstar would put you with Michaels, I believe."

"But I'm a Herstory!" Xavier protested.

"Well, with all due respect, that may be true in the mortal world, but here, Your Highness, you are a Morningstar, Prince of Hell."

Xavier sighed heavily. "Michaels… is that a Vampire or a Werewolf?"

"Neither. She's a Witch," Greywolf replied. "Actually, she's a Priestess of the Old Magik and Head Witch here at the Academy." "Are you the

Alpha?" Xavier blurted out. His eyes grew wide momentarily, as if surprised by his own question.

"No, I am the Alpha's Beta, his second. The Alpha of this territory is a king in his own right. Although he does bow down to Lucifer, out of respect," Greywolf answered, his tone perfectly neutral.

"So the Alpha doesn't work?" Xavier pressed the subject further.

"That's right. His pack works for him. His job is to protect the pack, to find wolf children born without a pack and guide them into their change."

"Oh… Cool… Thank you for answering my questions," Xavier glanced at Cliff, who was standing in a sort of daze. "Uh, Little Man?" Cliff didn't answer. Xavier waved his hand in front of Cliff's face, no response, so Xavier poked his arm.

"You are calm, Master Clifton," Greywolf said in a commanding voice before his voice softened. "Now are you ready for a snack?"

Xavier watched as Cliff seemed to come back to himself and reengage with the world around him. "Is that a wolf trick?"

Greywolf side eyed him but said nothing.

"I was hoping you had some cookies I could share with my brother!!" Cliff exclaimed, obviously excited. Xavier said nothing as Greywolf handed Cliff a plate piled high with cookies. "Milk?" Cliff asked hopefully.

"Of course, Young Master Clifton. Your Highness, if you wouldn't mind, there are glasses in the cupboard next to the refrigerator over there. Help yourselves," Greywolf turned back to his cooking, ignoring the boys as they filled the cups and left the kitchen quietly.

"Isn't Mister Gingerman the best?" Cliff gushed, stuffing a fifth cookie in his mouth. They'd found a comfortable couch to sit in in the grand foyer to enjoy their snack. Other than a small group of younger students on the other side of the room, no one was around.

"Yea, he's a great cook for sure," Xavier replied, shoving his eighth cookie in. "I wish I'd had some of these the day I got here. Definitely would have made me like the place more."

"Don't you like it here?" Cliff asked, gulping down the last of his milk.

"I do. I just miss my home, my friends from before. My mom," he answered, trying to sound happier than he felt.

"I miss my mom." Xavier was caught off guard by the comment. Nephilim didn't know their mothers, from what he was told, since they all

died when they were born.

"I didn't know you remembered her."

"I do. I remember her from the moment I could think. I remember she loved me," Cliff said, sadly. "She didn't want to leave me, she cried when she knew she was going to die. She made her mother promise to love me, but she couldn't." Cliff didn't seem to be talking to Xavier, rather focused on remembering a moment before he was born. Xavier felt uncomfortable for the umpteenth time that day but didn't move a muscle, afraid to miss something important about his new brother. "My mother loved me. I know that for fact," Cliff said with absolute certainty.

"Well, she was a smart lady because what's not to love, kiddo?" Xavier replied, bringing his brother's head to his chest and hugging him tightly. "And now you'll always have me and Arya… and Gwen. We're your family. Always."

Cliff hugged Xavier back and started to cry silently into his brother's chest. Xavier's heart felt squeezed from the pressure of holding back his own emotion, staying strong for his brother the way he'd stayed strong for Arya so many times before. This was his role, magic or no magic. He was the big brother. It was his job to protect Arya, and Cliff and Gwen from now on.

Arya had gone to her room, upset from the conversation with Nanny Mary but not wanting to say anything to Xavier… what did she mean by dark and dangerous deeds? What kind of person just says that, she thought bitterly, her fear of her new life and this unfamiliar place renewed. As she sat on her bed, leaning against the wall, staring out the window at the blue sky, she wondered what she was and what horrible things she was destined for.

"Dark and dangerous deeds?" Amber asked worriedly, startling Arya from her thoughts. "What's that?"

"What?" Arya asked surprised.

"Dark and dangerous deeds? You just said that."

"Oh, I didn't realize I was thinking out loud. I'm sorry," Arya said, not answering. "What're you up to?"

Amber gave her a suspicious look but allowed the subject to drop. "I'm planning to go to the Shadow Shops with the Lastrange sisters and

we'd love for you and your brother to join us." Arya smiled, remembering the invitation from the first day.

"Ah sounds great but my brothers are spending the day together so how about just me? If that's not too much of a disappointment?" Arya gave Amber her best smile.

"Duh, Princess. Of course you're invited," Amber laughed.

"Please stop calling me Princess…" Arya begged once again. "I really don't feel comfortable when people call me that."

"But it's what you are, Arya. Even if we become great friends, there are laws in place for the supernatural creatures… you are our princess and we must treat you with the respect that title brings," Amber said gently. Arya's face filled with disappointment. "How about this? Here, I'll call you Arya, but in public, I'll call you either Mistress Arya or Princess? Both are allowed."

"How do you know all this?" Arya sighed and wondered about her new friend.

"Well, I was trained to be your handmaid, if that makes sense," she replied. "So I was taught about all the royal protocols and expectations. Most of the people at the school will call you Mistress Arya, as you're a student and that's allowed, but people here who aren't your classmates or teachers will probably refer to you as Princess."

"Why were you chosen to be my handmaid?" Arya asked.

"It was the price my father paid for a bargain he struck made with your father…"

"Bargain?" Arya repeated. "Like a deal?"

"Well, yes. You see, I am a Witch but my father was born without access to magic. He never ascended and when he was sixteen, he was angry he'd been denied his nature. So he promised Lucifer his firstborn… me." Amber tried to smile but Arya saw the resentment against their fathers in her eyes. "When it was clear I was going to be a powerful witch, Lucifer decided that I would be yours."

"Mine?" Arya didn't understand. "My what?"

"I'm your property." Amber said flatly. "My magic is yours and my life is yours." Arya stared, completely shocked by this. "I will serve you until I die. That was the bargain my father made to get the mediocre magic he is so proud of possessing."

“What? This is crazy! No, I refuse. You’re free,” Arya argued.

This was nothing she prepared for. Owning another human being? That wasn’t right, obviously. Abraham Lincoln had freed the slaves, she thought, or did that only apply to mortals? Arya’s mind was spinning.

“Your Highness, I’m deeply sorry to have disturbed you with this,” Amber said, kneeling in front of Arya, realizing her untrained magic was building. “Please forgive me!”

“I don’t understand…” Arya whispered. Her emotions were clouding her mind. She could feel the power within trying to escape. Her senses were tingling, pulsing as if electricity was flowing through her veins. “What’s happening to me?”

Arya stared in wide-eyed panic as Amber felt the energy flowing off the Princess and ducked just in time for Arya to scream as the magic exploded from her body. With a burst of uncontrolled magic, Arya collapsed on the floor, unconscious. Amber stood shakily, carefully lifting Arya onto her bed.

“ARYA!” Amber heard Xavier scream. She sighed and gave a last look at the unconscious princess before retreating down the hall to see Xavier fighting to enter the girls’ dormitory.

“She’s okay, Master Xavier,” Amber whispered.

“I felt her… what did I feel?” He demanded, vexed he couldn’t get past the threshold. Behind him, Cliff was quietly, staring at the scene.

“Calm down, Master Xavier,” Amber said, tilting her head at the younger boy. Xavier recovered himself and backed away. “She’s fine. I just revealed some unpleasant truths and she got upset. Magic has a way of manifesting itself when a witch is upset. She’s sleeping it off now.”

“Unpleasant truths? What now?” Xavier demanded. Xavier sounded exhausted and irritated. Amber sighed, frustrated but she knew he needed to know the facts.

“That I am her handmaiden, her property…” Amber paused, “Just as Theo is your Manservant… your property.”

Xavier’s mouth fell open. “Uh,” was all he could say, stunned into wordlessness.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness. Perhaps the morning will find you both in better spirits,” Amber bowed slightly before running back up the stairs, leaving Xavier to his thoughts.

For a moment, Xavier was stunned and said nothing, gazing at the empty staircase. Then, shaking his head and forcing an easygoing grin, he returned to spend the rest of the day with his younger brother, listening and making the odd joke now and then. His mind, however, was still stuck on the most recent discovery.

How could they own other people? Kids their own age? How and why was this possible? He swallowed his emotions and ate dinner with his brother. After hugging Cliff tightly goodnight, Xavier returned to his dorm. To his relief, Theo wasn't there so he readied himself for bed, pretending to be asleep when Theo arrived. Sometime during the pretending, Xavier drifted off into a troubled, nightmare filled sleep.

Chapter Seven

Arya woke the next morning with Amber by her side, holding a cup of tea. After the briefest of respites, the night's events came rushing back and Arya felt ashamed instantly.

"Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry! I can't control myself when that happens!" Arya threw her hands over her face and sat on the bed, refusing to look at her companion. "I don't even know what is happening."

"You don't have to apologize," Amber said softly. "I know you didn't mean it and I know you don't want it to be, but the truth is the truth."

"Please don't say it."

"I'll be your friend and your roommate." Amber paused as Arya sniffled. "But I am also your handmaid and it is my duty and honor to serve you."

"I don't want a handmaid," Arya protested, finally sipping the hibiscus tea Amber brought her, perfectly sweetened with honey.

"I don't think it matters what you want," Amber replied, kindly. "We are all subject to Lucifer, some of us more than others." She paused, picking up a banana muffin and handing it to Arya, who smiled weakly as she took it. "Besides, this is a better life than my father would have given me. He was selfish to his dying day, which wasn't long after I was born. He used his magic for personal gain and it came back to bite him. In the face.

Literally." A slightly demented smile appeared on Amber's face as she continued. "He was trying to cheat a shapeshifter who ate him."

Arya laughed nervously and Amber grinned. "What about your mother?" Arya asked.

"She works here!" Amber said happily. "She's one of the gardeners. She makes sure the witches have all the herbs and spices we need for any rituals. I still get to see her all the time and we have dinner together at least once a week. It's great."

"That's nice," Arya replied, her voice barely a whisper. She was now jealous of the person she owned, Arya thought, swell. What a terrific person that made Arya.

"Yea, it is," Amber replied. "Anyways, since we missed our chance to go to the shops yesterday and school term begins on Wednesday, we should go today."

Arya ate her muffin and finished her tea, nodding. "Sounds great," she said with a mouthful of crumbs.

"I'll go find Xavier and see if he'd like to join us today while you get ready," Amber smiled at Arya, closing the door behind her. Arya sighed, getting off her bed.

★★★

Xavier pretended to stay asleep until after Theo left in the morning, unwilling to face the look of deserved hate Theo would most certainly give him and now that he knew why, Xavier couldn't blame him at all. When Theo finally left, he got up and showered, dressing in the Academy uniform but wishing he could wear his favorite pair of jeans and his lucky t-shirt. He left his room for breakfast and found a place near a corner with some students, who fled the table when he sat down. Wallowing in his breakfast, he didn't notice Amber or the Lastrange sisters approach, only looking up when they sat down next to him.

"There you are," Amber's voice was bubbly and filled with her usual cheer. "We've been looking all over. Theo said you were still asleep but when we sent Cliff up to look, he said you weren't in your room, but I guess we know why now." She laughed at her own joke.

“Master Xavier,” The Lastrange sisters said in unison, “would you care to accompany us to the Shadow Shoppes District today?” Xavier looked between the three, unsure of who to answer.

“Arya is coming,” Amber added. “She is in dire need of a familiar to help her learn control of her magic. The sooner she gets one, the better.” Xavier nodded at this explanation and agreed to join the girls for the afternoon.

“We’ll leave at half past ten,” The Lastrange sisters said, “from the portal room.” Then the triplets got up from the table and walked away without another word. Amber continued to chew on her apple and studied Xavier’s confusion with mild interest.

“Quickest way to travel from the school but you need special permission and it has to be created by a Witch or Warlock of incredible skill, so it’s not cheap and not usually an option but your father wants you to have the best,” she explained. “Meet me in the grand foyer and I’ll show you where the portal room is.”

“The best?” Xavier cocked an eyebrow. “That guy didn’t even like me, so I doubt it has anything to do with me and everything to do with Arya.” Amber shifted in her seat uncomfortably.

“Where is Theo?” She asked, changing the subject.

“No idea. We don’t really hang.”

“Hmmm,” she murmured to herself. “Excuse me. I’ll see you when it’s time to go.”

Xavier watched her disappear into the crowd of students that were moving from table to table, friend to friend. He was jealous of their connection and missed his friends, especially Brian and Luke. What did they think about Xavier just disappearing, he wondered. Did Brian hate him? Xavier wouldn’t blame them if they did. Shaking his head, he finished his breakfast and was making his way to the boys’ dormitory to get ready when Amber approached with Theo, looking miserable, at her heel.

“Excuse me, Master Xavier,” she began. “Theo would like to apologize for his terrible behavior towards you and beg you for your forgiveness.” Theo looked as ashamed and humiliated as Xavier felt, wishing he could disappear in that moment as other students were turning to stare.

“It’s fine. Whatever,” Xavier muttered, trying to remove himself from the situation.

“No, it’s not. Theo is your man-servant and he is yours. He should behave himself.”

“Can we please not do this here?” Xavier mumbled, his voice low so no one staring would hear.

“Your Highness, everyone here knows who and what you are. Being ashamed of that will not help you here, not where there are so many who would wish you to be alone and without friends.” Theo finally spoke, his voice filled with kindness for the first time. “I’m sorry for my earlier behavior.”

“It’s alright, man. I get it.” Xavier said, trying to end this conversation here.

“I thought you were aware of the bargain that made me a slave and I should not have judged you so harshly.” Theo bowed slightly. “Forgive me, your Highness.”

Xavier was taken aback and stunned into silence. Amber smiled in approval and gave a slight bow of her head before hurrying up the girls’ dormitory stairs.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Xavier replied, feeling like a character in a movie.

“I really am sorry for being a jerk,” Theo said, looking at his feet.

“I’m sorry too,” Xavier said. “I didn’t know anything before I got here with my sister.”

The boys walked up the stairs to their dorm room together, not saying another word until the door closed behind them.

“Will you tell me the bargain that made you a slave?” Xavier asked as delicately as he could.

Theo gave a heavy sigh, sinking into a chair in the shared area. “My mother made that deal… she was human and my father is a vampire. She wanted to live, you know? So that was the deal, her child in exchange for her life.” His heart was clearly broken from the betrayal. “So when I was born, Lucifer had one of his Nephilim heal her and take me here, where I’ve always lived. I don’t even know who my father is.”

Theo looked small and sad to Xavier in that moment, causing him to feel sympathy for his formerly rude roommate.

“I’m sorry,” he offered, wishing there was something, anything else, he could say to ease his new friend’s pain. “I won’t treat you like a slave, I promise.”

Theo gave a half smile that was filled with deep sadness. “It’s not so bad. I was educated in the best Academy in the world and have never lacked for anything. The King is very generous to all of his wards.” Theo finally looked into Xavier’s eyes. “I didn’t know you didn’t know anything.”

“I grew up in total ignorance.” Xavier muttered bitterly.

“Well, I grew up knowing I would serve you and it never occurred to me that you didn’t even know you were supernatural, let alone royal.”

“Yea, ain’t it a trip?” Xavier gave a bitter laugh. “My mother wanted to protect us, I guess. I don’t know.”

“She must be a really good mom.”

An awkward silence washed over the room, neither boy spoke until Xavier noticed the time. “Want to come with us to Shadow Shoppes District? The Lastrange sisters, Amber, Arya and I are all going. I’d really like to not be the only dude, you know?”

Theo laughed and agreed to join, picking up his bag. “Sure, I need some stuff for Vampiric Studies anyways,” he replied.

“Do I want to know what that is?” Xavier asked and Theo shook his head, both laughing and grinning at each other. For the next few minutes, they cracked jokes and Theo told Xavier stories about the twins’ new friends. Finally Xavier felt as though he had a true friend here in the Academy as they walked down the stairs together. They talked about the different classes the Academy offered, waiting for the girls to arrive in the grand foyer. First the Lastrange sisters arrived with Meg, then Arya and Amber came next, giggling as they talked about the fashions of the Shadow Realm. Xavier rolled his eyes at Theo, who responded by grinning. Finally, Cliff walked up with Zaya, who was carrying baby Gwen in a baby carrier.

Noticing Xavier’s puzzlement, Arya began to explain, “I wanted Gwen to come so I could pick her up some things and Zaya reminded me that I don’t know how to care for a Nephilim baby, so I suggested she join us.” Arya smiled at Zaya, who was unrelenting in her cool neutrality.

“Cool. How about you, Cliff? Excited to do some shopping?” Xavier asked his little brother, who shrugged.

“I don’t have any money,” he replied sadly.

“No worries, I got you, Bro,” chuckled Xavier. He ruffled Clifton’s hair and walked away, motioning his sister over. “Speaking of money, do we know how this works?” Arya shrugged, shaking her head. “Uh, Theo?”

“Yea, man?” He strolled over.

“How do we pay for things at the Shadow Shops?” Arya asked, embarrassed.

“Oh, that’s the coolest part,” he said excitedly. “Lucifer has a tab!”

“Wait, what?” Xavier laughed. “A tab?”

“Yea, all the shops have an approved list of names that charge the King for all purchases. It’s great. Amber and I bought all of our school things and it's so hard not to over buy things we didn’t need.”

The group began to walk down a corridor to the entrance of the southernmost tower. Meg and the Lastrange sisters lead the way as they walked up the spiral staircase, passing closed doors that lead seemingly out of the tower every story, while Theo, Amber and the twins bonded.

“Oh my gosh, remember when I debated over buying a unicorn or pegasus?” Amber laughed. “Thankfully, Theo talked me out of it and I didn’t get in trouble. Although, we’ve never actually met your father so I wouldn’t know what we’d have to do to get his attention.”

“Really? I thought he brought you here?” Arya asked.

“Oh, well, other than then I guess.”

“Where’s the Portal Master?” Meg asked as they arrived at the top of the tower to a sealed door that wouldn’t open for Xavier when he tried.

“It’s magically locked,” Amber explained when he gave up.

“Oh cool,” Arya said, thinking of all the things she’d keep locked by magic at home if she only knew how.

Just then a strange man with a rainbow braided beard and bizarre clothing came running up behind them. “I’m here, I’m here!” The warlock’s hair was a mess and his clothes disheveled. “I’m sorry I’m late, young ones. Where are we off to today? The Outlands? The Moon? Titan?”

“Titan? Jupiter’s moon?” Arya asked, surprised.

Amber laughed and shook her head. “Just the Shadow Shops today, Professor Weatherly.

“Seriously, we can go to Jupiter’s Moon?” Arya repeated.

“Not without invitation until fifth year magical studies, I’m afraid,” Madoc Weatherly replied. “Good to see you again, Master Xavier. Mistress

Arya, allow me to introduce myself," he said with an over-exaggerated bow.

"No allow me," Xavier said. "Arya, this is the Head Warlock of the Academy, Madoc Weatherly."

"Head Sorcerer," Madoc corrected with pride. Xavier shrugged subtly to his sister, who just grinned at the odd man.

"Pleasure to meet you, Professor Weatherly," she replied, causing the warlock to peacock with pride.

"Oh it is my pleasure, Princess," He cheerily replied, putting a black and yellow knit cap over his messy rainbow hair, his beard mimicking the pattern on the hat and changing colors. Arya glanced at Amber and they giggled together.

"Professor, if you wouldn't mind, we're eager to see what a portal is like." Arya spoke with a regal air and Xavier was struck by how comfortably his sister asked for things here. She would have died from embarrassment before speaking in front of more than two people in their old school, Xavier thought.

"We're off to the Shadow Shops, Professor," Claire explained.

"Time to do some shopping!" Caliope and Clarissa cheered. Arya giggled and nudged Xavier, who snorted in reply.

"To the Shadow Shoppes District? Very well," The head sorcerer sounded disappointed and led them through the door. There were five windows, evenly spaced apart, and on the floor, in the mosaic tile was a large pentagram with candles lit at every point. "This is where the portal will appear. Please stand back. If you fall into a portal before it has a destination, you will be killed."

The dire warning made less serious by the chipper voice he'd used. Smiling and winking, Madoc began the ritual and spoke a language unknown to Arya. Within moments, the pentagram began to glisten into a rippling pool, first a deep black that lightened to a shimmering soft blue.

"Alright, hop in and you'll be there in a blink of an eye."

"That's it? Just jump in?" Xavier said, untrusting. "Will it hurt? How far do you fall?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine, Xavy," Arya placed her hand on his forearm. "He's the head honcho. He knows what he's doing. We'll be fine."

The Lastrange sisters walked to the edge of the glimmering pool and jumping in, disappearing beneath the surface without a splash. "Don't be

afraid, Your Highness. We will go first."

"Me next!" Meg laughed and followed her friends.

"Our turn, roomie," Amber grabbed Arya's arm and they jumped together.

Zaya merely stepped in, clutching the baby to her chest. Theo smiled and jumped backwards into the pool, while Cliff waited for his brother, taking his hand.

"I'll go when you go," Cliff said, clearly nervous. "This is my first time too."

"On the count of three. One… two… three!" Xavier and Cliff jumped into the portal together with their eyes closed, landing with a soft thud less than a moment later. Opening his eyes, Xavier looked around, seeing his friends, his sister and the most amazing shops his eyes had ever seen.

★★★

Landing in the very center of the district, the shops were arranged in a perfect circle. Below their feet was the same mosaic tile pentagram from the Portal Room. Each shop was in a unique, distinctive building, unlike any of the other thirteen shops. Each was a different style, from a Victorian Manor to a rundown trailer. Each painted with different bold colors and patterns. Their eyes darted from shop to shop as Arya, Cliff and Xavier ooo-ed and awed at the wondrous sights. First their eyes were drawn to an old victorian painted a deep velvety purple with a sign that read "Broomsticks and Broomholders." Next to that was a "Familiar Familiars" in small, rusty trailer painted pink and a "Betsy's Bobbles and Buns" in a small cottage painted blue. Every shop was different and even the plaza itself was unique, with street vendors selling treats of all kinds; some the twins had heard of, some they hadn't.

"This is amazing," Xavier said in awe. Cliff shook his head up and down vigorously, his eyes drawn from building to building. "Where do we start?" He said, looking to Amber, the unofficial leader of this outing.

"I have your supply lists right here," she began pulling out two small rolled parchments.

Zaya snatched them from her hand and walked away. "I do this," she called back, taking Gwen in her carrier to the "Cauldron Boil and Bubble."

“I’m going to the joke shop,” Theo said, walking off alone.

“Oh, okay… well I guess that means we can do whatever we want and just meet the Nanny back here.” Xavier laughed and pulled Cliff to the “Familiar Familiars” shop while Arya wandered over to “Unfamiliar Friends,” Amber explained was it another Familiar shop, but filled with creatures much more rare than the other.

“They have everything from pegasi to unicorns to shadow cats… It’s really amazing,” Meg finally found her voice as she followed the two girls into the shop. “I dream of having a Pegasus one day but I doubt I will. They’re terribly expensive.”

“I’d love a Unicorn,” Amber replied.

“Oh, wait! Let’s stop here!” Arya exclaimed as she spotted a sign that read “Potions and Poisons” in red dripping letters that still looked wet. Amber shifted nervously but followed Arya into the small, concrete building painted black with no windows, without a word.

An old woman, small and frail, gray with white, wrinkled skin dressed in a flowered smock stood at the counter where a small black cat was curled up, sleeping in a regular cardboard box, under a small lamp lighting the corner she stood. The old woman acted as though she’d been expecting them.

“Welcome to my shop, Princess.” She bowed briefly before turning to Amber and merely nodding. “I am sure you’d like to look around, but first, if you would be so kind, I’d love to read your fortune.” Amber’s eyes widened as she shook her head at Arya, who ignored her. The shop was barely lit enough to see and it increased Amber’s agitation, but Arya was too interested to be concerned.

“I’d love that,” Arya said earnestly. “But I really do want to look around first. It’s how I’ve always shopped,” she explained. “My mother insisted I check out the merchandise before wasting a shop’s time.” The old woman nodded and waved her hands at the shelves.

“Take your time,” her voice was stronger than Arya expected from someone so frail.

Walking into the first aisle, she saw love potions of all kinds with a large, handwritten warning: Caution: does not cause true love. Infatuation may last days or months. Multiple doses may be required. Arya raised her eyebrows at Amber, who shivered involuntarily.

“We should go, Mistress Arya,” Amber said in the voice Arya had secretly dubbed her diplomatic voice and Arya rolled her eyes.

“It’s fine, Amber,” Arya said, moving into the next aisle. “I just want to see what’s here.”

“Danger,” the old woman appeared in front of them, scaring Amber into a startled scream. Arya jumped too but managed not to squeal. “Danger is here, Princess.”

“What do you mean?” Arya asked, taking a step back.

“My potions and poisons are powerful.” The old woman’s eyes clouded over and her voice dropped low and gravely. “You will seek to wield all the powers you can by midnight of your twenty-first birthday. Your match and your equal will best you or you will best them. Death and danger await you and yours on your journey. Be weary and be woke. Enemies called friends, be careful whom you trust. What awaits you may change, fate cannot be tamed. Claim your throne and win your life. Give it up and you will cease.”

Arya backed away from the old witch from the moment her eyes turned white. Amber clutched at Arya’s arm, the taller girl using the smaller one as a buffer between herself and the old witch. Bumping into the door, Amber screamed, turned and yanked it open, pulling Arya out the door with her.

Back in the daylight, Amber jumped away from Arya, both angry and relieved.

“I will NEVER go back in that shop as long as I live,” she said, her voice shaking from the fear.

“I’m sorry, really. I just thought it was like everything else in this place, weird but … safe?” Arya finished questioningly. “I don’t know what I thought.”

“You are new to this world, Arya. Nothing is safe! That old hag was right, you have to be careful. You can’t trust anyone!” Amber half-screamed at Arya.

“What about you? Can I trust you?” Arya asked her friend, who looked at her with sad eyes.

“No,” she replied, her voice filled with regret. “Lucifer is my true master, I serve you at his command. If he ever demanded I turn against you, I would have no choice.”

Arya turned away from Amber at this blunt honestly and walked away. “Don’t follow me,” she called over her shoulder, walking in the opposite direction.

★★★

Xavier was exploring the shops with Cliff, who had dragged them into “Betsy’s Bobbles and Buns” which turned out to be a shop with tasty pastries and unique handcrafted creations from birdhouses to small chests. Mini-statues of different animals moved randomly, sensing their movement and turning towards their new audience. Cliff saw an elephant that was silently trumpeting her trunk and instantly fell in love.

“Can I get it?” He asked Xavier hopefully, who ruffled Cliff’s hair and nodded, too enraptured in the peculiarities of the shop to answer aloud.

“Wonderful choice, young sir,” a very small gray haired man said, coming around from behind the counter. Xavier jumped in surprise. He hadn’t seen the man before. He was dressed remarkably normal. Wearing a white button up shirt, black trousers with brown suspenders and nice shiny black shoes. Xavier jumped in surprise. He hadn’t seen the man before. His hair and beard were both trimmed short but Xavier couldn’t help but think of the mythological dwarves and looked away, hoping his eyes hadn’t revealed his thoughts.

“Thanks,” Cliff said, oblivious to Xavier’s reaction. His usual eight-year-old enthusiasm allowed him to embrace the man with complete acceptance. “I have always wanted one of these. A couple of my friends have one and they said they were really expensive so I didn’t think I could have one, but this is my big brother and he said I could have one.”

Cliff took a large deep breath to make up for not taking one during his small speech. Xavier ruffled his hair again and Cliff beamed with happiness. The small man finally gave Xavier a good look, his eyes widening before sweeping into a low bow.

“Your Highness,” he said. “Beg your forgiveness, I didn’t recognize you there, Prince Xavier.”

“Whatever, it’s fine,” Xavier replied awkwardly. “Just here to see what you’ve got going on…”

“Um, Mister Dwarf Sir,” Cliff began. “Why is your shop called Betsy’s Bobbles and Buns if Betsy isn’t here?” Xavier was too shocked to say anything but the small man laughed.

“Well, Betsy’s my wife and she’s at home with our new baby girl,” the man laughed.

“Is she a dwarf too?” Cliff asked, curiously. Xavier had no idea what to say. The man smiled again and touched the tip of his own nose.

“Why yes! We are both one hundred percent dwarf-blooded. Not a lick of elf in either of us. Very rare these days, but we’re proud of it.”

Xavier looked away from the conversation. A lot of magical creatures seemed to be very proud of being whatever it is they were and Xavier didn’t even know what he was.

“And you, Young Sir? What are you?” the dwarf asked.

“I’m a Nephilim,” Cliff replied. Xavier watched as the smile on the dwarf’s face diminished slightly, but Cliff was too absorbed with playing with his new moving elephant statue to notice.

“Yes, he’s my brother,” Xavier said with a bit of anger in his voice.

The small shopkeeper nodded and his smile grew again. “Do you know, Young Sir, but we have every animal in the world and on Titan? Would you rather something else? Perhaps a Hippogriff or a Unicorn?”

Cliff just shook his head. “No, I love this one.” Cliff held his elephant close to his chest which seemed to be squirming to get free.

“How much?” Xavier was not interested in spending anymore time in this shop.

“I’ll charge it to our king’s account, Your Highness,” the dwarf replied. Xavier nodded and took Cliff’s free hand, leading him from the shop. The reaction to his brother had made him instantly dislike the man, but Cliff hadn’t noticed. He was too happy to have a toy he’d wanted for a long time.

“Thank you so much, Xavy!” The boy exclaimed. “I love it so much! I’m going to call him Elliot: Elliot the Elephant.”

Xavier ruffled his hair again as they walked across the circled courtyard, passing a few shops that seemed more dedicated to fashion than interesting witchy things. Entering Familiar Familiars, Xavier was excited to see that it was a shop filled with animals, from cats and dogs to larger felines like lynxes and mountain lions and larger canines like wolves and

dingos. He grinned as he knew he was finally getting the pet he'd always begged his mother for.

★★★

Arya was angry and frightened by her experience with the old witch, but she didn't want to think about it so she decided to wander into a shop in a tiny shack on stilts called "Mama Tuvalu's Good Fortunes" and see what she had to sell. Entering through the blue painted door, Arya was hit with the smell of jambalaya, which she had devoured every day of their New Orleans vacation with their mother a few years back.

"That smells amazing," she sighed dreamily, closing her eyes and remembering the flavor of the spices.

"You're welcome to have a bowl with your fortune," said a woman who sounded and looked like she came straight out of the bayou. "Ah, Princess," she bowed briefly. "I was expecting you yesterday but then something changed the fates and blew you in today."

"I'd love a bowl," Arya replied. Mama Tuvalu motioned her to sit in a chair at a small round table with a crystal ball and a stack of tarot cards. "This stuff is real?" She asked surprised.

"In the right hands, all magic is real, Child." The woman left the room, returning a moment later with a steaming bowl of jambalaya with cornbread on a napkin. "Now you eat this while I look at your future a minute."

The woman sat down opposite Arya, not saying a word. She held the crystal ball as it had clouded up with a purple and blue haze. Mama Tuvalu tisked and placed the crystal ball down, it's haze instantly fading into nothing. She picked up the tarot cards and shuffled them.

"Cut this deck, child."

Arya cut the deck into three different sized piles. Mama Tuvalu remained quiet as she stacked the deck before spreading the cards in what Arya already knew to be the Celtic Cross spread. Mama Tuvalu tisked again before collecting the cards and putting them to the side. Arya merely raised her eyebrows questioningly, her mouth full of cornbread. Within moments, she finished the bowl and was using the bread to get every remaining drip.

Mama Tuvalu waited a moment before handing her a wet wipe. "Clean your hands, child." Arya wiped her hands clean and Mama Tuvalu grabbed

her left hand, turning it to see her palm. She tisked again.

"What?" Arya asked, finally. "What is so bad you won't say anything?"

Mama Tuvalu side eyed Arya, not answering for a moment and continued to study Arya's hand. "You have contrasting fates, child," Mama Tuvalu replied at last. "This is my good fortune shop, but I can't give ya a good fortune. Your future is bound by a test on your twenty-first birthday, if you make it that long. My cards say someone will try to kill you and soon, but my crystal ball says if you live, the trial you will face next will cost you something greater than your life, although it could cost you that too."

"And my palms?"

"They say that you'll fall in love with something powerful and not of this world," she said, staring Arya in the eyes. "It could be a Great Evil or Great Good, that isn't clear to me, child."

"How will I know this great love?" Arya asked, choosing to ignore the dark prophesy this old witch had to offer her.

"Be weary of anyone who offers you a single black rose," she answered, her eyes hazed over like the other witch. "Two will offer, you will accept one. The choice you make will define your fate." Her eyes returned to normal. "Child, I see darkness and danger in your path. Be careful, Princess. Storms are coming for you."

Arya felt her anxiety grow and she stood up. Her chair crashed to the floor.

"Charge whatever to my father's account," she said, running out the blue painted door, straight into Amber. "Ooof!" She said slamming into her friend, nearly falling down if Amber hadn't caught her.

"You okay?" Amber asked as Arya regained her footing.

"Yea, fine. Just more warnings of my apparently grim future," Arya replied, clearly frustrated.

"Maybe we should get something sweet to eat?" Amber suggested, pointing at a candy store called Trick-or-Treat.

Arya chuckled but shook her head. "I'm stuffed."Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Mama Tuvalu staring at her from the shop's window. "Let's go check out those rare creatures.

★★★

Xavier and Cliff were petting every creature in the Familiar shop, absolutely in love with the lions and wolves. Cliff asked the witch who owned the shop if she had elephants and was left disappointed when she told him no.

"It would've been cool, little dude, but where would we put an elephant?" Xavier laughed, ruffling his brother's hair. "So how do we pick a familiar?"

"You don't. Yours will pick you when it's ready. The Nephilim will not find a familiar but may find a friend."

"Why can't he have a familiar?" Xavier was annoyed by this anti-Nephilim bias he noticed among the supernatural community and finally understood Zaya's cold attitude towards everyone but her charges.

"I meant no offense, Your Highness," the witch replied. "Nephilim cannot have familiars because they are not a witch or a warlock. Just as a werewolf and an Immortal cannot have a familiar." Xavier felt embarrassed and apologized. "Your Highness did nothing wrong. I admire your defense of your brother. He is lucky to have you at the Academy now."

Xavier managed to smile in return and followed his brother through the shop, petting all the different creatures there. His brother was drawn to the lizard tanks and upon seeing a small anole after all the larger varieties of reptiles, begged his older brother to let him have it. Xavier rolled his eyes and agreed, asking the shopkeeper for help. As she was assisting Cliff and gathering everything he'd need to care for his new pet, Xavier noticed a lynx staring at him from across the room.

Approaching it slowly, Xavier nearly screamed as it jumped from its high perch straight into his arms, weighing a solid thirty pounds. It began to lick Xavier's face with its sandpaper tongue and Xavier laughed as he was filled with a sense of calm and love.

"Congratulations, Your Highness," the witch said happily from across the shop. "You have found your familiar."

"It's a lynx right?" He asked, carrying the large cat around the store as it nuzzled him, purring loudly.

"Yes, specifically it's an Iberian Lynx, one of the most endangered feline species in the world. We have only ever had two in the shop, both

rescued from human poachers," the witch said, causing Xavier to hug his big cat a little tighter.

"Who would want to kill something so beautiful?" He said bitterly, rubbing the cat's ears. It purred even louder, sounding like the engine of a small bike.

"Humans are terrible creatures," the witch agreed sadly. Xavier didn't reply but put the cat down, who stayed next to his feet, rubbing on Xavier's legs. "Would you like me to send all the supplies you need onto the Academy for you?"

"Yea, that'd be great. Cliff's too."

Xavier looked at his brother who was happily talking to his lizard, introducing it to Elliot. The lizard merely blinked at Cliff but the boy took that as a great sign and grinned.

"Of course, Your Highness," the witch smiled at the boy. "I know you are worried about him, but he will be fine. He may be a Nephilim and he will not bond with the Anole the same as you will with your familiar, but he will bond and it will protect him as well as it can for such a small creature."

"Uh, thanks," Xavier replied uncertainly. "I appreciate the help. Thanks again. Come on, Cliff," he called out to his brother. "Let's go find Arya."

★★★

Finally arriving at the Unfamiliar Friends shop, Amber opened the door for Arya, a bell dinged and the smell of horses and hay filled their noses. Meg followed them in.

"Holy Hell!" gasped Arya as she was greeted with the very first unicorn she'd ever seen. A beautiful glittering creature with a pale blue coat and deep violet mane and tail. "Wow!"

"WELCOME!" boomed the shopkeeper's voice from somewhere the girls couldn't see. "Welcome to my Unfamiliar Friends! The rarest familiars on this side of the World, I can assure you," he continued. Standing up from behind a stall that contained a Pegasus, the most remarkably unique man Arya had ever seen saw who his guest was and immediately bowed, "Your Highness, my apologies for the mess. It's very difficult to keep things clean when you're dealing in living creatures."

Arya grinned. “Not at all, Sir.”

The man had a bright green hair mohawk and purple goatee braided with multicolored glass beads. He was very tall, standing at least two full feet above Arya’s smaller frame, and very strong looking, which Arya assumed he must be to care for all the animals.

“Allow me to introduce myself, Princess,” he said with another greatly exaggerated bow. “I am Julio Montoya and I am a rare creatures dealer. The only one in North America, in fact! If I don’t have it and can’t find it, it can’t be found.” Julio Montoya was obviously a very proud man.

“So, Mister Montoya, how do I pick a familiar?” Arya asked after her friends wandered off to pet the Pegasi and Unicorns in their stables.

“You do not. They pick you, although if you simply wish for a magical creature, I can accommodate nearly any request,” Julio said, his pride returning to his voice.

“So how does one get a familiar?” she pressed.

“Walk around and introduce yourself to all the animals. If one is destined to serve you as a familiar, we will see a noticeable difference in the creature’s behavior.” Arya raised an eyebrow but said nothing. She was hopeful that her familiar would be some rare creature. It was a long shot. Based on the books she’d secretly borrowed from Amber while the girls were supposed to be sleeping, she knew most witches had cats or dogs as familiars. To have anything else was almost unheard of, but still, she hoped.

“I suppose I’ll start at the front and work my way back,” she whispered to herself. The first creature she met was a shimmering silver unicorn with a pale purple mane, horn and tail. Reaching out gently, her heart seemed to burst from happiness the moment she touched the twisted horn. “Why, hello there,” she whispered to the unicorn, who simply bobbed his head up and down gently, enjoying her scratches behind his ear. “You’re not my familiar, are you?”

Finishing the scratch, she wandered off to the next one, a sparkling gold unicorn with a pale pink mane, horn and tail. The same happiness burst out of her heart when she touched the mane. “So that’s your trick, huh? Making people feel happy?” She laughed, and scratched her ears before moving on. Further down, she could hear Amber and Meg laugh while petting the same unicorn. “Yep, unicorns are definitely better than prozac,” Arya said to herself, chuckling quietly to herself at her own joke.

The next creature was swimming in a small pool, half sea creature, half horse. The tail of the creature was a deep, forest green and the horse half was a flat, royal purple, with an amethyst colored mane. “This… this is a hippocampus?” She asked the shopkeeper, who nodded, clearly impressed with her knowledge of the rare creature. “I thought they were pure fiction,” she said as she touched the nose of the merhorse, as she playfully thought. A feeling of freedom filled her heart as she stroked the creature. She spent a few more moments relishing in that amazing feeling it inspired before she moved on.

Moving between the equine creatures, she also met a Shadow Cat from Titan. According to Julio, a cat with the ability to move through shadows without notice. She also met a Night Wolf, who seemed entirely uninterested in her presence. “They normally go for the Wolf people, if you know what I mean,” the shopkeeper said winking. Arya nodded and continued.

She was nearly out of rare creatures to meet, with a few Pegasi, a hippogriff and another unicorn left. She was enjoying herself too much, just meeting these unbelievable creatures, forgetting her search for a familiar entirely. Finally, after meeting the rest of the creatures, she shrugged to her friends.

“No luck,” she waved at the shopkeeper. “Thank you anyways.”

“Wait! There is one more! Give me a moment and I’ll bring her up,” Julio said, disappearing between two stables through a threshold that lead to the back of the shop. Removing a unicorn from her stall, moments later, Julio returned with the final creature, locking it in the stall the unicorn had just vacated.

Standing in awe, Arya beheld the most beautiful creature she’d ever seen. Shimmering a blueish purple that seemed to change depending on where you were standing, with silver wings and hooves, lavender mane and tail, she stared for several moments before reaching out to touch the pegasus in front of her. She was filled with a sense of overwhelming hope and love, when suddenly, the horse creature began to kick the stalls, trying to escape her stable.

“My, my, my, this is unexpected,” Julio replied, pulling on his goatee thoughtfully.

“Oh my Goddess! Did you see that?” Meg whispered loudly to Amber, who was staring at Arya and the Pegasus.

“What? Why is she so angry?” Arya said backing up, her fear causing the Pegasus to fight harder.

“She is not angry, Princess. She’s trying to get to you…” Julio had a curiously thoughtful expression. “It would seem she’s your familiar,” Julio’s face burst into a large smile, both proud and excited. “Please be calm, so I may open her stable. You’ll see she means you no harm but if I am wrong, I can intervene. I swear this.”

Arya took a deep breath to steady herself and nodded, glancing back at her friends who were both still staring at her with shock. So this is definitely not normal, she thought, as Julio Montoya opened the latch that kept the stable closed, slowly easing the gate open. The Pegasus snorted with eagerness, causing Arya’s heart to beat faster, her blood electrifying.

A ding at the door went ignored by the shopkeeper, his eyes focused on the mare in front of him. Arya steadied herself again with another deep breath as the gate swung open completely and the Pegasus trotted up to her, neighing happily, bopping her head up and down. The mythological horse’s ears went forward as she pushed her head into Arya’s shoulder. Arya sighed with relief as she scratched her behind the ears.

“This is most unexpected,” the shopkeeper repeated to himself, glancing toward the door.

Xavier and Cliff stood, shocked by the sight of the pegasus next to their sister. Arya beamed at her brothers. Xavier was carrying a cage with his rare lynx inside while Cliff had a small terrarium with a lizard of some kind.

“YOU GOT A PEGASUS?!” Cliff couldn’t control his excitement and handed the terrarium to his brother, before running over to his sister and her new familiar.

“Shhhh, young man,” Julio admonished. “You’ll be removed if you startle my creatures again.” Cliff fleetingly looked ashamed before turning his attention back to the beautiful creature and his sister.

“Seriously?” Cliff asked excitedly. “I just got a lizard!”

“I bet it’s a very smart lizard,” Arya gave him a warm smile and hugged him from the side. “But I guess… I wasn’t really expecting anything to happen… and then she just wanted out.”

Arya's hand was smoothly moving up and down, patting her new winged mare lovingly. The Pegasus began to dance around Arya, nudging her with her head and shoving Arya with her shoulder.

"I believe she would like to give you a ride, Princess," the shopkeeper said. "But first, here are some informational books on the proper care and training of Pegasi you will need to really care for your familiar."

"Oh yes, thank you! I'll read everything I can about her," Arya was smiling from ear to ear and Xavier could honestly say he'd never seen her happier. He felt his heart twist in envy but remembered how it felt when his Lynx had jumped into his arms, how he'd felt whole at last. "Xavy, want to pet her?" Arya beckoned her brother over to where she and Cliff were stroking the magnificent creature.

"Better not," he replied. "I've got my Lynx and Cliff's lizard here and I don't want to upset the other animals here. I'll wait for you outside," he said, a large smile nearly succeeded in hiding his jealousy completely. Arya's smile faltered for a brief moment before she turned back to Julio.

"Can I name her?" Arya asked the shopkeeper.

"Anything you wish, Princess. Although this one is named Persephone Pelias, named by the Goddess," Julio replied, bowing again.

"Persephone?" Arya whispered to the Pegasus, who nickered, bopping her head up and down in apparent happiness. "I love it and you," Arya hugged the neck of the horse and felt her heart burst with love and hope, as the equine lowered her head, almost as if she was hugging Arya in return.

"Ummm, Princess?" Meg reminded Arya that her friends were still there gently. "We're going to go look at the other shops… do you want to come?" Arya shook her head.

"Thanks, but I want to stay with Persephone," she replied. Meg and Amber waved as they left the store with a ding of the bell. She turned back to Julio. "Please tell me what I need to know to take care of her until I get through those books."

For the next several minutes, Julio began listing all the things a new Pegasus rider would need to know. As an afterthought, he added, "oh, and she is capable of teleporting with a rider."

"Teleporting? How does that work?" She asked surprised.

"Well, much the same way a portal works, only you tell your Pegasus where you need to go and she will go exactly there."

“Tell her? How?” Arya didn’t understand. How could a pegasus teleport her exactly where she wanted to go?

He chuckled to himself. “You feel it in your heart, picture it in your mind and the Pegasus will feel it and see it and bring you there…” he trailed off, “But best make sure you mean to, or you could find yourself in unfamiliar lands…”

“Say again?” Arya said uncertainly.

“Once, I found myself on Mars, unexpectedly, when I was quite young I was training my father’s herd, I was imagining what it would be like… then poof, there I was. I nearly died!” The Shopkeeper laughed again. “But don’t worry, the Pegasus will always stay with you and bring you back until you stable her in a specialized stall. I believe the Academy is already equipped, although if they are not, simply have the stable master send me a message and I will deliver everything you’ll need.”

Arya nodded, still stroking her horse with Cliff, who’d been standing in total silence, taking it all in. “Cliff, you better go find Xavy. I’m going to be taking Persephone back to the Academy… by riding her,” she gushed, excitedly. Cliff nodded before reluctantly leaving the store, staring at the creatures until the door closed behind him with a ding. Turning to Julio once again, she grinned. “Now how do I ride her?”

Julio helped her pick a saddle, bridle and reins. After he helped her tack her pegasus, he explained where to hold, where to have her legs and how to saddle properly as not to cause extra strain to her pegasus. When he was done, he helped her lead the pegasus into the main courtyard, where her friends were gathered. Meg and Amber were clearly telling the Lastrange sisters all about the rare familiar.

“Seriously, it’s the most beautiful thing ever,” Arya could hear Amber saying.

“It so is,” she heard Cliff’s high pitched excited voice. “I wish I had one.”

“There she is,” the three sisters said in unison. “What an exquisite creature.”

“Right? I’m so jealous. None of the animals even noticed we were there,” Meg replied, softly sighing.

“Figures the Princess got a Pegasus,” Theo’s resentment flickered briefly before he chuckled. “Man, I wish I could have one too.” Theo

glanced at Xavier, who had his back on the group.

Xavier was scowling, bitterly envious. He hated how jealous of his sister he was, but somehow, he had gone from the Golden Boy to someone people barely noticed around her. It was like they switched places, he thought bitterly, she's cool and I'm lame. Forcing his expression to return to a neutral one, he turned back to see Arya climbing onto the back of the glimmering periwinkle horse with silver wings, In the blink of an eye, with a pop, they were gone.

★★★

Hours later, Arya returned to her dorm room, having missed the dinner hour. Amber jumped off her bed the moment she saw the door open, Arya walking through, her face reddened from the sun and wind. Her red hair had blown wildly around, twisting into itself, causing her to look like a wild woman, but the expression on Arya's face was filled with undeniable joy.

"You look so happy," Amber said as Arya wandered around the room, pulling out her pajamas, looking dazed.

"I," she sighed, "feel like I'm living in a dream."

Arya was wondering if she was crazy. She'd always suspected one day she might really lose it, what with her intense anxiety and the strange things she saw but now, she just didn't care. Maybe she was locked in a tiny room and on so many drugs she couldn't think straight, but she was happier than she'd ever been, fulfilling fantasies she never dared to dream.

"It's the most unbelievable thing." Whimsy filled Arya's voice.

Amber studied her with a somewhat concerned expression but she didn't feel the magic sparking off Arya like she usually did, which was a sign that her familiar had absorbed excess emotion and helped center Arya, containing Arya's magic. Amber relaxed.

"So what was it like?" She eagerly asked.

"Absolutely exhilarating and terrifying, at first… And then, it… it feels like I've been waiting my entire life to sit on her back and fly."

"Sounds amazing!"

Arya closed the bathroom door on the conversation, leaving Amber standing awkwardly in the common area of their room. Arya looked at her

tangled hair and wind burnt cheeks in the mirror, her sparkling eyes and the smile she couldn't shake. "

Maybe I am totally nuts," she said to her reflection, "but this is better than I think I could ever make up."

Stepping into the shower and cleaning the day off her skin, she felt herself unwind and realized she'd never felt so calm before. Changing into her pajamas and forcing a brush through her wet, twisted and knotted curls, she finally emerged from the bathroom to see Amber had also gotten ready for bed and was sitting in the common area in her pajamas, reading a book on Pegasi care that Arya had dumped on the table there.

"So, what did my brother… brothers do after I left?" Arya tried to act as if teleporting away on a pegasus was perfectly normal in the supernatural world.

Amber raised an eyebrow but answered. "Master Xavier and Master Clifton returned to the Academy in the care of Zaya, accompanied by Theo, Meg, the Lastrange sisters and myself, where those of us who supped in the Main Hall had dinner before retiring to our dorm rooms"

It was the most formal Amber had been yet with Arya, which made her freeze and her smile vanish.

"What happened?" She spoke barely above a whisper.

Amber laughed spontaneously. "No, for real, we just came back and ate dinner. Xavier seemed pretty upset at first but after you left, he seemed to relax more and have fun. He even let his familiar out in the Main Hall, which was not okay and he received a demerit but it was also super funny because everyone was running all over the place, trying to catch him after."

"Oh good." Arya sighed with relief and laughed, her euphoria returning.

"I just have to practice protocol now and then… it's part of my education," Amber said somewhat seriously.

Arya nodded, turning to her nightstand. "I was so busy flying around, I forgot about dinner until I landed and couldn't find the kitchen." She began digging through the drawer. "Do you have any snacks?"

Amber pointed to the corner of the room, where several packages were sitting, neatly wrapped in paper and string. "Those are all the things Zaya picked up for you. She said she even picked up some things to keep you

going for those overnight study sessions," Amber said mimicking Zaya's accent flawlessly.

Arya smirked as she started ripping open one package after the other. Arya discovered books and clothing, snacks and a few pieces of emerald jewelry in silver settings with a note attached that read:

"To the Princess Morningstar,
daughter of Lilith and Lucifer,
A gift from the Shadow Shards Jewel Shop
for your sixteenth birthday."

"Wow, being royal has its perks!" Amber said, peeking over her shoulder.

Arya nodded, depositing most of the new things on her bed, leaving a few books on the floor in the corner with all the paper. Amber muttered a few words and the books floated over to the dresser, stacking themselves neatly with the Pegasi manuals. Then the paper neatly folded itself into a small cube and flew to the rubbish bin near the door.

"Now that is cool," Arya commented on Amber's use of magic.

"Oh you'll figure out how to do that by week three here," Amber said, brushing off the compliment. "It's simple magic, but I still have to speak my spells. Some witches can do it in their mind." Arya thought back to her mother muttering under her breath to clean up her magical mess.

"Well, if it makes you feel better, my mother still speaks her spells too," Arya offered.

"Really?" Amber was surprised by such a personal reveal about the queen. She had been warned not to pry into Arya's life outside of school by Madame Dupont, the headmistress, before her arrival.

"She's amazing, my mother. Even before I knew she was a witch, she was a doctor who saved lives."

"With all due respect, Arya, your mother isn't simply a witch… she's the Original Witch," Amber replied. "She was created by the Goddess herself, designed in Her Own Image." Arya didn't respond, but looked Amber directly in the eye. "Your mother is the Goddess on Earth to some, including my mother and me, which is why serving you is the greatest honor of my life. Not a punishment I must suffer."

Arya knew her mother was revered, objectively, of course, but she hadn't considered the significance. An awkward silence fell between the

girls as Arya climbed into bed, pulling open a bag of chips Zaya had included in a basket of food and sighed.

"I'm sorry, okay? All of this is really new to me and I really don't understand why my mother kept this from me… from us," Arya explained, crunching down on a chip. "Crap! These are so good! Bacon maple is an amazing flavor!"

Amber laughed and shrugged, "I guess I get why your mom didn't tell you, why she hid in the mortal world instead of living as a Queen in our Shadow one."

Arya cocked an eyebrow but just stuffed more chips in her mouth, chewing loudly.

"She wanted to let you find out who you were before finding out who you were supposed to be. She wanted you to be free, for at least a little while."

"I guess." Arya nodded thoughtfully, shoving another handful of chips in her mouth.

"She must really love you to have done that," Amber said softly. "My mother didn't have a choice, but she told me she'd have done the same if she could, but the Academy was our best and only option since my father made his bargain."

"I'm sorry about that," Arya swallowed. "I wish I could do something to make it up to you…" Her voice trailed off as it usually did.

"Let me ride your Pegasus!" Amber said hopefully and Arya squealed and gushed.

"It'll be the best thing you'll ever do," Arya assured her roommate. "I felt like that was where I was meant to be my whole life. It's why I lost all track of time."

"So where'd you go when you teleported away?" Amber asked, hoping Arya trusted her enough to share. Arya thought a moment before replying.

"The truth is I'm not sure I should say anything, because I'm not really sure where I went," Arya replied, turning in her bed to lean against the wall so she could see Amber more clearly. "At first, I tried to go home, but that failed so then I just imagined this amazing beautiful garden filled with love and suddenly, we were there… but then it grew dark and scary and cold… I didn't feel welcome there anymore so we left and found our way to the fields behind the school… I spent the rest of the time learning how to fly

with Persephone, because you don't really command a pegasus, they just do their thing and let you ride along."

"Yea, the book said something similar," Amber sighed dreamily. "It still sounds like you had so much fun. We're all jealous of you for getting a Pegasus as a Familiar… I have an owl as mine and I keep her at the Academy Aviary for the other flying familiars, which, don't get me wrong, I absolutely love her, but I can't fly on her back so I'm still a bit jealous of you!"

"I think I would be too," Arya laughed in response. "I totally didn't expect anything to happen, but can I tell you a secret? I kind of wish I had a normal familiar. The stable master, Arryn Bloodmaker, said normally they don't get equine familiars and that most of the horse species at the school were used for Supernatural Creature Studies and they didn't have a stable for a pegasi. The Shopkeeper had to come and specialize Persephone's stable so she can't teleport without me, I guess." Arya paused, confiding in her new friend, "I'm not used to being the center of attention. That's Xavy's role."

"Not here, Princess," her friend replied quietly and seriously. "Here, it is clear you are the True Heir and while he may not like it, he has to adjust. Just like you, Arya."

Arya said nothing and turned off her lamp. Moments later, Amber sighed and turned hers off. The girls sat staring at the ceiling, which had been spelled to resemble the night sky, and all the shooting stars in silence. Arya worrying about her brother and her new reputation and Amber worrying about Arya, they finally fell into uneasy slumber.

★★★

Xavier couldn't sleep. He just kept tossing and turning, thinking about his sister and her amazing day. Why didn't he go to the Specialty shop first, he thought bitterly before shaking his head, reminding himself that he really did love his Lynx that he'd named Luther. As soon as they'd returned to the Academy, Xavier released him from the cage, the familiar had taken away his resentment and helped him calm down from his bitterly envious moment. Xavier couldn't admit to himself that he was jealous but he was and it was an entirely new feeling for him, especially where his sister was

concerned. The only thing he'd ever wanted of her's was her best friend back home. His mind wandered back to his past.

He'd been so popular. Everyone wanted to be his friend, to help him out with his homework and almost all the girls flirted with him. The only person he could ever talk to about his serious problems dealing with his sister was Brian, his best friend, who seemed a whole lifetime away from him in that moment. Closing his eyes, he thought about Brian and how they'd spent hours hanging out with each other in Brian's room, away from Arya and their mother, just talking and laughing, playing video games on his ps4.

As he was thinking, his mind and body felt like they were falling away from each other. Suddenly, Xavier was standing in Brian's bedroom door, looking at his friend, who was pretending to watch something dumb but really reading another one of his Lord of The Rings books, for the umpteenth time.

"Brian?" Xavier said out loud, surprising them both. Brian jumped and spun around, his Star Wars sheets falling away to reveal Guardians of the Galaxy Pajama bottoms

"Xavy?! Dude, what are you doing here?! It's like two in the morning, man!" Brian exclaimed, jumping out of bed to hug his friend, but when he got there, he passed through Xavier like air. Brian couldn't touch him and Xavier couldn't touch Brian or anything else in the room. "Am I dreaming?"

"Uh… yea, I guess," Xavier stammered, uncertain of what was happening.Xavier did a karate chop in the air and forced a grin onto his face. "I just missed you a lot man and wanted to see you… so here I am, ghost form!"

Brian paused, stroking his short goatee, his black hair hanging loosely around his shoulders. "I miss you too, man. Where'd you go? Why didn't you say goodbye?" His dark eyes filled with hurt, and Xavier felt like he'd been punched in the gut.

"My bio-dad showed up and we got sent away to a boarding school," Xavier said bleakly. "I wouldn't have left if someone had given me a choice. And it was so fast, I thought I'd be able to text you on the way but they took our phones. There's not even a computer that I can find to email you."

Brian groaned. “That sounds like my kinda hell, man.” They stood together in silence for a moment before Brian asked about Arya.

“She’s great. Loves the school and everyone loves her. It’s like she’s a totally different person.” Xavier tried to hide his resentment but Brian cocked his eyebrow.

“You sound like you’re not doing that great.”

“I miss here,” Xavier shrugged. “I miss our school… you and Luke… all the girls.” Xavier winked, giving his friend a goofy grin. “Now I have to start all over and try to convince these prep school girls that I’m good at things. My reputation didn’t follow me.”

The boys chuckled and Brian yawned. “This is so weird. I’m really tired, but I’m dreaming?”

“Go back to bed, man, and dream a different dream… I’ll see you soon.” Xavier said, watching as Brian crawled back under the sheets covered in Darth Vader’s mask, rolling over. Just as Xavier was about to try to return to school, Brian sat up one more time.

“Hey, Xavy?”

“Yea?” Xavier replied, standing in the doorway.

“I miss you,” Brian yawned again and rolled over, falling asleep, with his book open next to him and the television still on. Xavier closed his eyes and willed himself to wake up back in his own bed.

Opening his eyes, the sunlight blinded him momentarily. He sighed, disappointed it had only been a dream.

Chapter Eight

At breakfast the next morning, Xavier avoided Arya, which hadn't been easy because he heard her call him when he met Theo for breakfast but pretended not to. Theo, to his credit, went along with it, confused but didn't ask for an explanation. Arya had given up relatively quickly though and sat with the Lastrange sisters and Meg, who seemed to always be near Clarissa or was it Claire… Caliope? He wasn't sure but one of the sisters was definitely into Meg and vice versa. Xavier momentarily wondered how the supernatural world felt about same-sex couples before searching the room. He spotted Cliff with his friends, who waved but stayed with them, clearly having a good time. Turning his attention to Theo, Xavier realized he didn't know that much.

"So tell me about yourself, Theo," Xavier said between bites of strudel. "Like, what do you do for fun around here?" Xavier realized he'd spent the entire few days self-obsessed and felt like a jerk for not knowing more about the person who slept in the same room he did.

"Sports," Theo said, his mouth full of Eclair. "Specifically football. I love it."

"I'm more of a hockey guy myself," Xavier replied. "But I do like the Broncos. It's sort of a requirement since I'm from Colorado."

“I like the Chicago Bears. They’re the only team I’ve ever rooted for. Not sure why, really. Just love ‘em and root for them every Sunday I get to spend in the Mortal Realm.”

“Yea, what’s up with the no television or computer thing?” Xavier asked, enjoying the conversation with Theo.

“Um, I don’t know. I think it’s so we don’t confuse the worlds we live in more than anything else… but they do say it’s because all the magic creates interference and the signals are blocked by it,” Theo shrugged. “Just wait until Football season and we can go the sports bar I like off-campus.” “Wait, there’s a sports bar near here?” Xavier’s brain was spinning.

“Yea, there’s a small, mortal village about ten miles away. This is an Elite Private Academy so they simply deliver things and ignore us. I sneak away during football season so I can watch whatever’s on. It’s not always the Bears but it’s always a good game.”

Xavier nodded, saying nothing but chewed the last bite of his strudel slowly. This was all very interesting information. “Cool. Good to know.”

“There are even a few guys in town that aren’t that bad, if you get over the fact that they’re human…” Theo’s eyes flashed. “Sorry, I know you grew up thinking you were but… for me, I grew up reading about how they persecuted people like my father and like me… like you.”

“Yea, I get it,” Xavier said, not really getting it.

Theo said nothing but finished his milk and sighed. A few minutes passed in silence before either spoke again.

“So, when do we get our classes?” Xavier asked, changing subjects. This was a school and so far there was no sign of learning happening.

“Today, I think,” replied Theo. “You’ll meet with your counselor later when you’re summoned.”

“Summoned?”

“Yea, it’s weird. You’ll know it when it happens. I’d hate to ruin that for you,” laughed Theo, mysteriously. “But yea, today.”

“Coooooool,” Xavier said, drawing out the sound. “I guess, I’ll just wait and see…”

“My guess is Arya and you will be first, since you’re the head boy and girl now,” Theo joked.

“Is that a Harry Potter reference or is there really a Head Boy here?” Xavier laughed.

“Well, sort of both. They’re not Head Boy or Girl but rather Head Witch, Wolf and Immortal. They form the Student Council and make a lot of the decisions in the school. Obviously the wolves choose their student alpha, Nathaniel Timberson, FYI. He’s pretty popular here, especially with the girls. Head Immortal is an upperclassman Vampiric Immortal named Oscar De Longpre. Pretty sure he’s dating Caliope Lastrange. Head Witch, sometimes Head Warlock, depending on whether it’s a guy or a girl, is Vanessa Newton. She’s amazing! Already in the most advanced classes for magic and only seventeen… but like I said, I bet you’ll be Head Immortal in no time and Arya Head Witch.”

Xavier absorbed this information, trying not to think about the last bit. He definitely wanted to meet the Student Council. Get in good with them, he thought, and I’ll regain my status without being in Arya’s shadow.

“Cool cool cool,” Xavier said, mimicking Andy Samberg on Brooklyn Nine-Nine, but the reference went over Theo’s head, so he dropped it. “So what are you doing today? Besides meeting our counselors.”

“Well, I was thinking about organizing all my stuff today. Maybe see if my friends want to stop by and meet you,” Theo suggested.

Xavier thought about the pile of stuff Zaya had bought him that he’d dropped at the foot of his bed and nodded “Sounds like a plan. Ready to go?” The two left the Main Hall and returned to their dorm to wait for their meetings with their counselors.

Arya watched her brother go and her heart ached. He was mad at her, she could tell but she didn’t know what to do about it since he’d never really been mad at her before. The whole situation was so new to her. She’d never actually been the popular girl before, let alone, the one to claim the attention for herself. She felt guilty but, at the same time, she felt amazing.

“So do you think you’ll go riding today?” Caliope Lastrange asked, interrupting her thoughts.

“Oh yea! For sure!” Arya exclaimed, popping a donut hole in her mouth, chewing it slowly to prevent more questions.

“Awesome. I’ll see if the stable master might be willing to let us ride together. The Academy has unicorns and regular horses, plus a hippogriff or two, last I checked.” Arya had been so focused on her own mare, it hadn’t occurred to her to look at the other creatures living in the barn. Today would be a good day for that, she thought, thankful she had friends to keep her

company. Her heart twinged as she remembered her best friend. Did Latoya hate her?

"Oh! I'll run down to the kitchen and see if Greywolf Gingerman might make us some sandwiches and we can picnic. It's such a great day outside," Clarissa gushed. Arya smiled again.

"Make sure he adds cookies. His are the best," Meg explained to Arya. Her hand was on Claire's lower back and Claire leaned into her, agreeing.

"Oh yes, those macadamia nut ones are the best!"

"Oh and some hibiscus tea!" Arya suggested. The others nodded in agreement. "Where's Amber?"

"Oh, she's in the meeting with her counselor. She was summoned before breakfast hour. I guess she's got a full plate this year so they're trying to accommodate her demands. Which is not easy," Caliope replied.

"Oh?" "Yea," laughed Meg. "Before you got here, we called her princess." The group laughed to themselves. "She's awesome, just high maintenance, you know?"

"I had no idea. She's been so welcoming to me," Arya said, wondering if they knew the status of her relationship to Amber.

"Well she would be," Claire snorted. Clarissa gasped and Meg let her go, moving away slightly. "Oh my Goddess, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean anything by that!"

Arya sighed heavily. They obviously knew. Just then, in front of Arya's face appeared a sparking and flashing, like a sparkler in the air, hovering about six inches away. Arya backed away and it moved forward, staying the same distance.

"Oh, you're being summoned to the counselor!" Claire said with relief. "Follow it and it'll lead you to her office."

Arya sighed and got up from the table, the hovering light flashing with little sparks moving about a foot away when she turned in the right direction. She followed it out of the Main Hall through the grand foyer. It disappeared through the solid wood of a door, opening it somehow behind it. She walked down the long corridor until the orb grew bigger and disappeared through another door. On the door, on a neat little nameplate it said "*Michaels, Sabrina. Witch*." Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, Arya knocked on the door.

"Come in!" A high pitched, cheery voice called out.

Arya turned the handle and pushed the door open to reveal the most explosively colorful room she'd ever seen. Mixed patterns from plaid to polkadot of all colors were all over the place, including on the woman in front of her. It was a lot to take in, Arya thought to herself. The woman in front of her was the palest woman she'd ever seen but her cheeks were splashed with freckles, her hair was a mousy brown, curly mess that suited her round face. She wore bright pink lipstick, purple eyeshadow and big dangly earrings of what appeared to be Jupiter. She was wearing a blue flannel unbuttoned over a pink shirt with yellow polkadots. Arya couldn't see her pants but she suspected they were equally bold.

"Oh hello! Hello! Please, sit down." The woman motioned to a green and yellow checkered chair. "Let's talk about your future," she said, her smile growing larger by the second, if that was even possible. Arya sat and smiled weakly at the counselor. She giggled. "What a pleasure to meet you, Mistress Arya Morningstar!!" The woman gushed, "I am Sabrina Michaels and I am your student counselor as you'd say in the mortal world, but I'd say I'm more of your personal guide to helping you achieve your best self!"

"Nice to meet you," Arya said softly, forcing herself to maintain eye contact and not look around the room at the odds and ends, bits and bobbles.

"Well, let's see here…" The witch conjured up her student records instantly and smiled. "You are quite the academic, I see. Lovely, lovely! You'll quite enjoy the schedule I've given you. Of course, you'll take Magical History, because you should know your family history." Sabrina Michaels chuckled merrily at her own joke and continued without noticing Arya had not. "You'll take Spell-casting and Potions-making, which I think are pretty obvious… Species Origins isn't until next term… Let me see…"

While the witch was pondering Arya's future at the academy, she took the moment to look around. The photos on the desk didn't move, which disappointed her, but there was a feather duster cleaning the top shelves on its own, which Arya thought was pretty cool.

"Will I be able to take anything about Magical Creatures?" Arya asked, suddenly remembering Persephone.

"Now why would you want to take that, Mistress Arya?" The woman chuckled as if that was a preposterous idea. "You'll have your Mortal and Witch studies to balance. I hardly think adding an elective is a good idea.

No, no…" The woman didn't even look Arya in the face as she shot her down.

Arya felt a surge of confidence she never usually felt and asked again. "Well, Madame Michaels," Arya replied cordially. "My familiar is a Pegasus and I would like to take proper care of my lifelong companion. So you see, it's not simply something I want to do. I simply have to. For the good of the bond between myself and my familiar."

The smile vanished off the witch's face as she eyed Arya up and down, squinting as if to see something inside Arya herself. "Very well. The only available times you have are the weekends, so you'll have to take a one-on-one course with the stable master. Have you met Master Arryn Bloodmaker? He's also the professor for Supernatural Creature Studies, so I'm sure he'll be just thrilled to tutor you in this matter."

The woman smiled again, continuing on as before. "So Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings, you will take your Mortal studies, including arithmetic, english lessons and chemistry. Tuesdays, you'll take Mortal Government and Thursdays Mortal History. In a year and a half, or so, you'll complete your Mortal High School education but your education at the Academy will last until you are twenty-one, so do not feel like you should be in any rush to take every class offered here."

Arya nodded, trying to remember her schedule but getting overwhelmed.

"Your mother also informed me that you will require regular therapy as you go through this process as you have an anxiety disorder, which while unusual, is not unheard of here at the Academy."

"She told you that?" Arya was embarrassed. "I'm fine! I'm holding up just fine."

"It's okay, Dear, it's my job to make sure you're doing better than just fine," the witch said cheerily. "We'll meet once a week on Thursday afternoons to check in." Arya shrugged. Her mother had forced her into therapy years ago and never let her miss a session. Why should she be surprised, she thought.

"Wait, you spoke to her? How? I would love to speak to my mother!" Arya had planned to use the Pegasus to sneak home that weekend, but if Madame Michaels had a way to communicate. Maybe she'd let Arya use it.

“Well, no, Dear, she wrote to me… Oh I’m so sorry but Parent’s Weekend happens once every other month, and you do get to go home for one full week on the opposite month. In fact, Parent’s Weekend is in two weeks so circle that date on your calendar and get excited! I’m sure she won’t miss it.”

Arya barely listened to the rest of the meeting but she must have done well because she was dismissed moments later. Leaving her office, she ran into her brother. “Xavy, your turn?”

Xavier grinned. “What’s she like?”

“Very strict and formal,” Arya smirked, walking down the hall. With a gulp, he lifted his hand and knocked.

★★★

Twenty minutes later, Xavier was walking back through the grand foyer when Arya spotted him and called him over to where she was curled up with a book. He smiled at the familiar sight and sat in an overstuffed chair next to her own beanbag one.

“So much for strict and formal, Ya!” Xavier laughed. “You really had me nervous there. She didn’t once mention my ditch days and just said that I seemed to lack an interest in mortal life and I’ve been given permission to skip the rest of my mortal classes. How awesome is that!?!”

“What? I still have to finish mine!” Arya was annoyed at the unfairness. Though it was true that Xavier was barely passing, Arya shouldn’t be punished for accomplishing what was expected of her. “That’s so not fair.”

“Yea, but get this, she thinks I astral projected last night!”

Arya sat up, closing her book. “What? What do you mean? Where?”

“I had this dream where I showed up in Brian’s room and talked to him about leaving and I don’t know, it felt real. Woke up in my bed this morning. She thinks I actually LEFT my body and went to his room because when he went to hug me, he went through me. Like. A. Ghost.” He said, punctuating the last words.

“Wow, that is so cool. You tapped into your magic!” Arya said, clearly happy for him. Xavier felt momentarily guilty for avoiding her. Arya never treated him like he wasn’t important and he felt bad for being resentful

towards her. “I wanted to find you last night, but I didn’t get back until late… it was nearly curfew.”

“Oh yea,” Xavier replied, remembering her pegasus. Suddenly his envy was gone. He could astral project now. So far all Arya had going for her was blowing stuff around a room when she was pissed off and a horse with wings, he thought. Why had he been so stupid when she hadn’t done anything at all? “How was that?”

“Oh, just amazing. The girls and I are going riding today. You should come,” she offered.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m hanging with Theo,” Xavier shrugged.

“Oh, cool! Are you guys are getting along now?” Arya asked.

“ I think so.” He nodded.

“That’s great! I love Amber… She’s just the sweetest and I really like Zaya. Did she buy you snacks and call them study aids too?”

“I didn’t check, honestly,” he replied. “I just bonded with my familiar."

“Yea I heard about the Main Hall incident,” Arya laughed. “Sounded like it was really funny.”

Xavier agreed that it was and things felt right between the twins for the first time in days. They talked for a few more minutes before the Lastrange sisters returned to the grand foyer in matching riding outfits of white shirts tucked into black riding britches. Meg followed a moment later wearing a similar outfit of all black.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” The Lastrange sisters asked. Arya looked down at her outfit and shook her head, giving her brother a subtle eye roll.

“Nope, totally going to change now,” she replied. “See ya later, Xavy.”

She ran up the stairs before running down several minutes later with Amber, wearing variations of the same outfit, Amber’s a black top with tan britches and Arya’s a tan top with black britches. Xavier watched as his sister left with her friends and smiled, happy for her for the first time in days. Heading up the stairs to his dorm, he thought about Astral Projection and how excited he was to learn how to do it again. This time, on purpose.

★★★

The last few days before term flew by so quickly, Xavier and Arya had barely seen each other by the time the first morning's classes rolled around. Arya's mortal classes began on the first day of the term while Xavier had private lessons with Madoc Weatherly. Arya's magic was still wild and strong while Xavier's was reserved and confined, hard to detect but very clearly there. He'd astral projected three more times during his sleep and their counselor became concerned that he might accidentally expose himself as a warlock, which risked exposing all the Children of Night. As a result, Madame Michaels rearranged his schedule to include several hours a week privately tutored by the Head Sorcerer.

"I don't know that I can handle him," Xavier complained to his sister that morning at breakfast. It was just the two of them at a corner table, spending a few minutes alone. "He's just so…" waving his arms in random movements.

Arya couldn't help but laugh. "Just be patient…"

She looked down at her schedule for the first morning, a Wednesday. She had Math first followed by Chemistry and her morning ended with English lessons, all in the same classroom and by the same teacher, a Mister Jacob Blackwood, an Immortal. He was also her History and Government teacher, so she hoped he was nice.

"I wonder who else is forced to take Mortal Studies," she muttered bitterly.

"I'm sorry, Ya. I didn't ask to be taken out of those classes. Madame Michaels just knew I am not meant for the Mortal World later in life. You'll probably live in both, a highly successful witch slash lawyer," Xavier teased. She laughed at her former dream. It's true, she thought, she had wanted to be a lawyer ever since she had watched a marathon of SVU with Latoya. They'd decided then and there. They were going to put those dirtbags in jail.

"I could just hex them now. Seems a waste of eight years if I'm being honest," she sighed. Xavier shrugged.

"Maybe, but Latoya is still planning to be a lawyer so you can always help her by casting spells on the judges to favor her," he said, trying to lighten the mood. Arya glowered at the mention of her best friend. She hadn't been able to teleport anywhere in the mortal realm yet and missed her friend terribly.

“She misses you too,” Xavier whispered, squeezing her hand. They finished eating and waited for the morning schedule to begin in the next few minutes. “Anyways, she’ll be excited next time we go home and she hears about how popular you are here.”

Xavier shoved her gently, laughing. Arya smiled and nodded. It was true, she had more friends now than she’d ever had and they weren’t just there to get close to Xavy, she thought.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” Arya asked. “How normal this all feels already?” Xavier let out a sigh and agreed. “I thought our lives were ending when mom told us everything but now I feel like they’re just beginning.”

“Remember when you read Harry Potter and you were so disappointed when you turned eleven and didn’t get your letter?” Xavier laughed at the memory.

“If only I’d known!” She giggled as the bell rang out. “Time for class!”

She was excited despite herself. She loved learning and there was nowhere she felt more at home than in a classroom. Xavier rolled his eyes.

“Time for my private lessons with the Great Wizard,” Xavier sighed, chuckling to himself.

“Meet at lunch?” Arya asked, gathering her stuff. She didn’t even look over her shoulder as she ran off to her first class.

Xavier smiled at the sight. She was glowing.

★★★

Arya hurried to Professor Blackwood’s classroom to see three other students enrolled. She sighed with relief. She would have hated to be alone, but she also hated large, noisy classes. She looked at the three unfamiliar faces and smiled, clutching her books to her chest, trying to breathe as steadily as she could. The Professor wasn’t there when the bell to start class rang and Arya was afraid to turn around in her seat, having chosen the one closest to the front of the room. Finally, a few moments later, the door to the classroom opened, followed in by the most handsome teacher Arya had ever seen.

Standing over six feet, Arya thought he had to be closer to seven. His black hair was styled in a preppy pompadour and he was dressed in a well-

fitting black suit with a matching vest under the jacket, a deep crimson shirt with a black tie. HIs ensemble was made complete with monk strap shoes. Arya knew this because Latoya often drooled over magazine ads featuring men half as handsome as the one that stood in front of her now, smiling, apologizing for being late.

"Hi, welcome to Mortal Studies! I am Jacob Blackwood," he said to the small group. "I know I am young to be a professor here at the Academy at thirty but I just started! Today is my first day and I'm sure you'll have as much fun as I will here, learning about mortals and completing your mortal high school education, which will allow you to transfer to a mortal university when your time at the academy ends." He paused. "Now, let's go around the room and introduce ourselves. Who wants to start?" A girl behind Arya raised her hand and Jacob nodded before interrupting. "Hold up. Let's form a circle with our desks and chairs so we can all look at each other."

The next several minutes involved moving desks around the room, with screeching and scraping of the legs ringing out, hurting Arya's ears. At last they were all looking at each other.

"Alright, young lady," the teacher said, "why don't you start us off?"

The small dark eyed, caramel-toned-brown-skinned girl who volunteered earlier swallowed hard and nodded. She tucked a loose strand of her long, straight black hair behind her ear and took a breath.

"Hi, I'm Leloni. I am from Oahu and just ascended a month ago. I'm a witch but my father is a mortal. I guess I'm a halfbreed and my magic wasn't guaranteed? Anyways, my dad wants me to come back to the island when I finish school, to help our ohana. So I'm finishing my high school diploma so I can get a decent job when I go home."

Next, a boy with yellow hair and blue eyes who was bouncing his leg introduced himself. "I'm Jimmy. I'm from New Jersey and I like to take long walks on the beach with pretty girls," he said, obviously flirting with Leloni.

"Focus, Jimmy," Jacob warned with a warm voice.

"Right, right, I'm an Immortal. No magical powers, but I'll live forever and if I finish my mortal studies, I'll use that to go to college later, get stupid rich and become Batman." Arya laughed at that causing Jimmy to

wink at her. “I was in this class last term with the former professor, so this is just me keeping on keeping on.”

“Oh, that’s great. Next up, you,” Jacob said pointing to Arya. She nodded and centered herself, the way she had whenever she had to do anything in front of her classes, the way her therapist had taught her.

“I’m Arya,” she said, hoping her voice didn’t betray her nervousness. “I am from Colorado and I am a witch. My brother and I ascended last week and now we’re here.” She was surprised how steady her voice was, how calm she sounded. Jimmy gasped and Leloni looked confused.

“You’re the Princess,” Jimmy said with certainty. Arya nodded, shifting in her seat slightly, trying not to look embarrassed. She lifted her head, straightened her back and steadied her breathing as subtly as she could. “I heard you were here.”

“Busted,” Arya replied, raising both hands.

The other boy in the room whistled. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Arya turned to look at the startlingly handsome boy with umber skin, deep grey eyes and a charming smile. “And you are?”

“I am Baku. I am from Georgia but my mother immigrated from Africa before I was born. We are Healers, Witches with Healing Abilities.” Arya wasn’t sure what that was but she knew to respect it. “My mother still practices old Magic. She didn’t have an Academy so I was raised to pretend I was mortal while performing rituals with my mother.”

“What brought you here?” She heard herself ask.

“I almost got caught,” he replied, with a thick southern drawl. “Professors Weatherly and Michaels had to come out and insist I be enrolled. My mother argued for a while but then she agreed as long as she could come too.”

He paused, glancing at the others but continuing to look Arya in the eye. “They gave her a job at her insistence even though they said she could come and learn since she’d never attended any academy.” His laugh caused Arya’s heart skipped a beat.

“Very interesting stories we have here, which will definitely come in handy as we study all the aspects of mortal life, starting with arithmetic.” The boys groaned but Arya sat up and opened her notebook, pencil in hand, ready to begin. Leloni quickly followed suit, then Baku with only Jimmy lagging, slowly pulling his book out of his bag with dramatic effect.

“Any day now, Jimmy,” Professor Blackwood said, writing a quadratic equation on the board. “Now, who can tell me what this is?”

Arya’s hand shot up, a startling contrast to the girl she’d been in the mortal world. The next two and a half hours rushed by with lessons that were familiar to Arya, allowing her to find her comfort zone again. By the end of class, she felt confident and like she had friends. The small group decided to meet together for lunch, which thrilled Arya, who kept sneaking looks at Baku and his beautiful white smile he’d give whenever he caught her, causing her to blush a deep pink that nearly matched the fire of her hair.

★★★

Xavier walked into Madoc Weatherly’s office, which was just one floor beneath the portal room in the southernmost tower of the school, to see the Sorcerer levitating near the top of a bookshelf, flipping through the pages of a thick, leather-bound book. The warlock’s beard was now turquoise and his oversized knit cap was orange with a white puff ball on top. He was wearing a black and yellow Hawaiian shirt with grey sweatpants and sandals with black socks. Xavier had to admit, the Warlock was nothing he’d ever seen before.

Xavier cleared his throat, but the Warlock didn’t look up. “Uh, hi? I’m here for my lesson?”

The warlock fell backwards in the air, seeming to fall on his backside midair. Correcting himself, the wizard broke out in a giant grin. “Right you are, my boy!”

The wizard slowly lowered himself to the ground, landing and bowing before righting himself with a grin. “Welcome to my sanctuary, Master Morningstar! I know we will have a very good time together.” He paused, setting the book down, closing it. “I’ve been told you can Astral Project. Nifty skill to have in all sorts of situations. From robbing banks to communicating over vast differences, you never know when it’ll come in handy.”

“Robbing banks?” Xavier asked, surprised. “Isn’t that against the rules?”

The wizard looked up, bewildered by the concept. “Rules?”

“Like to keep the magical world a secret?”

“Oh…” The wizard said thoughtfully. “I guess it is. Fancy that… Moving on. It is very useful to be able to Astral Project and I will teach you how to project yourself, not only anywhere you want to go, but multiple forms of yourself, in multiple places.”

“Wait, like cloning myself?” Xavier was getting more excited by the minute.

“Essentially but not in physical form,” Madoc replied, pleased. “First we must find what makes you capable, where your power resides…”

“What?” “Oh. Uh.” The warlock talked with his hands, with big flourishes, while explaining. “Well, obviously your power comes from your bloodline, which in your case, my boy, is quite… pure, but your power sits inside yourself, within your heart or your mind. Some young warlocks require more concentration to activate their gift, while others require more feeling. It’s simple magic, you see.”

“Got it,” Xavier said, sort of getting it but not entirely.

“Yes, yes. Good, good.”

“So, how do we figure it out?”

“You tell me about the times you’ve done it, what you were doing, thinking, et cetera.”

Xavier explained the first night; how he’d wished he could talk to his best friend. For all his eccentricities, Madoc Weatherly was a very good listener, not once interrupting but clearly taking mental notes and learning about his charge. When Xavier finished telling him about how he’d shown up in Brian’s bedroom and he hadn’t realized what was happening, the Warlock burst into a satisfied smile.

“You store your power in your heart. Excellent.”

“Why excellent?” Xavier asked.

“Because it’s much easier to master the heart than the mind,” he explained. He flipped the giant book he’d had open earlier to a page and turned it so Xavier could read the handwritten page.

Xavier cocked an eyebrow but focused on the words on the page.

Astral Projection

Astral projection is a rare but powerful gift that allows a witch or warlock to transmit their essence from one place in space and time to another place in

space in time. Some more advanced warlocks or witches are able to split project their essence to multiple locations, while others are able to send their essence into the past or the future, unable to interact with their surroundings. The most advanced are able to do so while still able to use their physical body.

There seems to be no understanding on who is gifted with such power, as rather impotent witches and wizards who are unable to spell-cast are still able to Project themselves outside of their physical bodies. This has lead those Higher Scholars and Sorcerers to believe that this gift is solely rooted to certain bloodlines rather than an achievable gift for an eager witch or wizard. However, this gift is rarely accompanied by the ability to create portals, a gift which seems to also be connected to bloodlines rather than talent. (See Portals for more information.) Those born with the skill to do either are still considered powerful representatives of the Goddesses chosen and while unskilled elsewhere, are highly sought in positions of power throughout the Shadow Realm.

Xavier looked up surprised. “So I was born to be able to do this?”

“So it would seem,” The Warlock replied. “I have only ever met a select handful with the gift myself and there is no understanding of what gives someone their special abilities. For example, as you know, I am a Portal Master, but I am also a highly skilled warlock.” He paused, his voice serious. “You will need to study very hard to be a great warlock and to access your gift at will, but I believe, Master Morningstar, you will stand a decent chance at becoming the King of Hell one day.”

Xavier grinned, pleased to hear the Sorcerer thought he had potential. “Wow!”

“I have seen your efforts in your mortal studies, and I must admit, it worries me that you did not apply your potential.” The wizard was somber now, his voice low and earnest. “Is there a time you can think of where you truly tried to succeed and did?”

Xavier thought about all the sports he played, but despite being a great athlete, he hardly tried. It came naturally to him. The way school came naturally to Arya. She’d been the one to help him maintain his grades to play sports. He hadn’t tried all that much, if he was being honest.

After a few moments passed when Xavier said nothing but stood, looking miserable, the Warlock sighed. “Perhaps you were never eager about your lessons? Or your mortal life?”

“Maybe.” Xavier shrugged.

“Be as that may, this is a fresh start for you, Master Morningstar, and I would very much like to train you to become the best warlock this school has ever seen, assuming you are a warlock.”

“Could someone who isn’t a warlock astral project?” Xavier asked, caught off guard by the possibility he wasn’t.

“Well, it’s certainly unheard of but magic is… ethereal… a living entity with its own will. The Goddess and The God made sure of that when they began their feuding at the birth of our world.”

Xavier sighed. He was confused again. Madoc launched into a lesson about the beginning of the world, about the God and the Goddess and their creations that were left to their own devices after a few thousand years.

“Worshipping is no longer necessary to practice magic, although it was at one time, it’s said. There are still factions of witches and warlocks, even wolves and vampires along with their immortal children, that worship your mother as a Goddess and your father as a God.”

“No way!” Xavier shook his head in disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding! My mom is a surgeon, not a goddess. I mean, come on! Would a Goddess wear bunny slippers?”

Xavier laughed at the thought of his mother in the bunny slippers he’d bought when he was nine. The ones from the Monty Python movie, with vampire teeth. She’d laughed when he gave them to her, he remembered. His heart ached for her in that moment. She might not be a goddess, he thought, but she was his mom and he missed her.

“Be as that may, you must safeguard yourself from outside influence and safeguard your mind. Make it an impenetrable fortress so no vampire may compel it and no witch may be-spell it, my boy. There are dangers here at the Academy and you will find some should not have trust.” The bell rang and Madoc beamed. “And that is that, my boy! Your first lesson is complete!”

“But I didn’t even try to project,” Xavier protested, surprised he wasn’t ready for the class to end.

“Nevertheless, you must take your lunch. I believe you have an appointment to keep,” said the Warlock, levitating to the bookshelf he’d been at when Xavier entered the room.

★★★

By the time Xavier found Arya at lunch, she’d already finished half her salad and was sitting with kids he didn’t recognize. She was thrilled to see him, though, and jumped up, hugging him.

“This is my brother, Xavy,” she said, introducing Xavier to the group. “That’s Leloni, Jimmy, Baku, and of course you know Meg and Claire Lastrange.”

“Where are your sisters?” Xavier asked Claire.

Claire laughed. “I know we’re usually together but we have completely different schedules. Caliope is with her boyfriend and besides, I think Clarissa is trying to get Nathaniel to notice her,” Claire said, looking at Meg who laughed.

“Nathaniel Timberson?” Xavier asked.

“Yea, you know him?” Claire replied.

“Of him. He’s the Alpha right?”

“Student Alpha,” Meg replied. “The True Alpha of this area is his father, Zachariah Timberson.”

“Right, but he is pretty cute,” Claire explained. “Clarissa has been into him since we were little. Our mother has been good friends with his father since they were at the Academy together.”

Meg made a face, revolted. “Cute? Really? He’s so gross and sweaty every time I see him.”

“Don’t bi-shame me,” Claire replied. “I appreciate both guys and girls with equal wonder,” she smiled, kissing her cheek Meg blushed at the group.

“You’re so adorable together,” Leloni sighed dreamily. “I left my boyfriend behind. He’s mortal and doesn’t know a thing. He thinks I won a scholarship to an elite boarding school and thinks we can be together when I come home.”

Arya was reminded of Brian, who had finally asked her out after months of flirting whenever Xavier wasn’t around. She sighed, squeezing

the girl's hand. "I'm sorry, Leloni. I left a guy I liked too."

"If you ever feel lonely, just come a'knocking, beautiful," Jimmy said arrogantly as he leaned back in his chair.

"Gross," Meg retorted. Claire giggled.

Jimmy sat forward, chuckling. "I was just kidding."

"Whatever," Baku finally spoke up. "Why weren't you trapped with the rest of us in mortal studies like your sister?" he asked Xavier.

"I had my own class with the Head Sorcerer," he said, sinking into the chair next to his sister.

Jimmy whistled. "Impressive."

"How'd that go, Xavy?" Arya asked.

"Surprisingly great," he said, grinning. "Yea, he told me my gift is rare and it can be specially honed so I can be this, like, super powerful wizard."

Baku laughed. "What, like Doctor Strange?"

"Wouldn't that be badass?" Xavier took a bite, chuckling.

Finishing their lunches, they discussed their afternoon schedules. It turned out Arya and Xavier were both in Spell-Casting Year One with Baku and Leloni. The Lastrange sisters were going to Defense Against Dark Magic Year Three, while Jimmy and Meg had Vampire Origins.

"Busy day," Arya quipped as the bell rang, ending their lunch hour.

"See you later," Claire kissed Meg and ran off to meet her sisters. Meg blushed as Jimmy made kissing sounds a few feet away, waiting to walk to their class.

"Let's go," Leloni called over her shoulder, Baku at her heels. "I don't want to be late. I am so excited to learn how to cast a spell!" Arya ran to catch up, leaving Xavier to trail behind them as he gingerly stood up and followed.

★★★

"Welcome to Spell-Casting Year One, or as I like to call it, Beginner Spell Casting," Sabrina Michaels stood merrily in the front of a classroom with several long tables in a row. "Take your seats!"

This class had a bunch of other new students. Arya and Xavier took the middle seats, which was a compromise they made in kindergarten when Arya wanted the front and Xavier wanted the back. Next to Arya sat Leloni

and Baku sat next to Xavier, completing the row. Amber walked in and waved, taking the seat directly behind Arya.

She leaned forward. “Sorry I didn’t see you at lunch… Madame Michaels was letting me know that I failed Spell Casting last term and needed to retake it so here I am.”

She leaned back with a what-can-you-do gesture. Arya smiled at her friend’s honesty. Several other warlocks and witches walked in. Some talked to each other and some nervously shifted, looking around. Most everyone in the room was obviously in the middle of their first day at the academy.

“Welcome, welcome!” Sabrina said again; her voice loud and friendly. “I am pleased to say that there are twelve of you, which including myself, makes us a perfect little coven to begin group spell casting as well as individual magic.”

Sabrina looked around the room at her students, muttered a few words under her breath and watched their awed expressions as their syllabus materialized on the table in front of each student, along with a small chest.

“Inside the chest are all the materials you will need in my classroom. Please don’t bring any outside magical instruments in,” she began again. “The syllabus outlines what we will learn this term together. You will be proficient in beginning spell casting before you can move on to more intermediate magic. Some of you may have more talent than others… Do not feel bad! We are all different and powerful in our own ways.”

She walked around the room, looking each student in the eyes as she spoke. It made Arya nervous but she tried not to show it. Leloni raised her hand.

“Yes, Dear?”

“Why is the class called ‘Spell-Casting’ if we’re just learning regular spells?” she asked.

“That is a terrific question,” the witch exclaimed. “Can anyone take a guess?”

Arya raised her hand. “Because you can use any magic for offensive purposes?” she guessed.

“Very good, Arya,” Madame Michaels said happily. “Yes, any magic that isn’t specifically on yourself can be used in an offensive way, so it’s good to be mindful of how you use any spell or ritual.”

Over the next hour, the witch explained the pros and cons, the rules and expectations in her classroom. She seemed like a fun, engaging and thorough teacher so by the time they ended their first class, even Xavier commented that he'd learned so much. Arya hadn't met the other kids in her class but she had laughed and had great debates with them about the definitions of good and evil. Not one person treated the twins like they didn't belong.

"I think that might be my favorite class yet," Leloni said. Arya agreed. Despite her earlier reservations about Madame Michaels, she really was a great teacher.

"What's next?" Xavier asked, patting his pockets to find his schedule and coming up empty.

Arya rolled her eyes as she remembered. "Magical History," she replied. "With Madame Dupont."

"Oh, Madoc Weatherly gave me that lesson earlier," Xavier complained.

"I'm pretty sure the Magical History is more than one lesson," Arya rolled her eyes at her brother's usual disinterest in History, all History. "I don't think we should be late, either way."

Xavier nodded and walked faster, forcing his sister to jog to keep up. Leloni was walking as fast as she could but Baku was still talking to Madame Michaels when Arya lost sight of him.

★★★

When they arrived in the classroom, they were relieved to see their roommates and several other students were people they knew. Madame Dupont, the matronly yet stunning young woman they'd met the first day, was smiling pleasantly from a corner of the room. There were several mats piled up in another corner and kids were gathered in small groups, whispering amongst themselves in confusion. At last, just as the bell rang, the last student came rushing into class and the door slammed behind him with a click.

"Welcome to Magical History. Here we will watch important moments in magical history including the dawn of this world, the creation of the First Man and Woman, and the Second Woman. We will follow the history of

magic as the God banished the First Woman from Eden and how the Goddess protected her. History will unfold here, retold so you may relish the past and learn from it." Madame Dupont's voice was melodic as she spoke with passion. "Please, grab a mat or a pillow, make yourself comfortable and we will begin in a moment."

Awkwardly, the students grabbed something to sit on and found an empty spot on the floor. Arya managed to find herself next to Amber, Bethany and Xavier. Baku found a spot near Shuri, who seemed oblivious to him as she was whispering excitedly to Meg and Claire. Jimmy and Leloni sat with two boys the twins hadn't met yet. As they all took their spots on the floor, darkness fell over the room. Everyone took a collective gasp when in the center of the room, a galaxy began to form and Madame Dupont began to weave a tale that captivated the students into silence for the next hour.

"Before there was anything," she said, "there were two Deities, a God and a Goddess. They existed in the universe, alone and yet together. Creating planets and stars, building entire galaxies, but within time they became bored of their larger creation and began to design life."

Different animal species appeared from Mammoths to squirrels, a platypus and armadillo and more. The magical hologram continued to change as she told the story of creation.

"First the creatures were created, on this planet and that planet, animals insects, birds, dinosaurs, anything they could think that amused their magnificent minds. Scattering life across the galaxies they had made, the two Deities came together to make something special… something new, something different, something more evolved… and so they created humanity…"

"Together, the God and Goddess built a new star system, with new planets, a brand new canvas. They spent time filling it with the best of their works from across their universe, weaving a tapestry of planets and moons. Together, the God and the Goddess chose their finest animal species to inhabit the third world in their new system. The Goddess formed the fauna that lived on the land and under the sea. The God built the mountains and the rivers."

The image above flashed over the world showing mountains and rivers as she spoke. "The Goddess and the God smiled and they looked upon their

world and felt it was ready, so they picked the most beautiful part of the planet they built, in the deepest heart of the thickest forest, in a beautiful clearing filled with fruit-bearing trees, flowers and a gentle flowing river for their newest project. Together they designed mankind."

The students oo-ed and awed as they were impressed by the images. A man appeared, strong and tall and Madame Michaels continued weaving her tale.

"The God created the First Man, a strong, tall, dark-skinned creation he called Adam. As he imagined Adam, so he willed Adam into existence. The Goddess thought it was delightful for a first of the species, but she thought her first should be special and so she created the First Woman," Madame Dupont said as suddenly.

Lilith appeared with Arya's youthful face smiling above them and Arya gasped. Xavier reached out for her hand and he calmed her.

"With fiery red hair as bright as the reddest flowers and brilliant green eyes deeper than emeralds, she was perfect. As the Goddess imagined her, She willed her to life and called her Lilith." Arya stared at her own face in the mirage as the teacher continued to speak. "Unbeknownst to God, the Goddess had whispered into her daughter the ability to manipulate the world around her, thereby creating, not only the first woman, but the First Witch."

Arya's head was spinning and Xavier could barely think as they watched their history unfold. The story of Aya and Baan, the original Vampire and Wolf, left them stunned. Their mother had failed to impress on them her value to the world as it was. The twins held hands, keeping their calm through their connection and watched as the history played out in front of their eyes.

★★★

By the time class ended, they were in awe of everything. Arya and Xavier had trouble processing what they'd seen. Their mother had endured so much. Her children had created the vampire species and the werewolf curse was because of their selfishness. As they wandered out of the classroom, the others gave the twins their space, mentioning something about meeting at dinner. Slowly wandering the hallway trying to find their way to the grand

foyer again, the twins walked in silence. They were lost and unwilling to admit it.

Xavier sighed. “Everything Mom told us was a lie.” He sounded resentful.

“Yea, but to protect us,” Arya defended their mother even though she was also very bitter.

“Stop, okay,” Xavier replied. “Don’t defend her right now. I can be mad. So can you.”

“What good will it do?” she asked sadly.

Xavier sighed heavily and leaned against the wall, letting his feet slide out from under him until he was sitting on the floor, using the wall as a backrest. Arya sat down next to him, crossing legs, tucking them under themselves. “Every vampire that killed a woman to create an immortal child did that because our mother’s first daughter was afraid to die. Every kid who has to turn into a wolf from the time he’s sixteen on for the rest of his life, that’s on our brother, our mother’s first son. It’s all on her.”

“Yea, that’s true…” she mumbled.

“And we have no grandparents. Unless you count God!” He paused, “and the Goddess. Which is just so messed up.”

His sister nodded, saying nothing. After a few moments, she smiled. “Come with me,” she said getting up. “You definitely need this right now.” Arya led Xavier out of the corridor out a door to a familiar path that ended at the stables. “Let’s go riding,” she said, leading him into the barn where her Pegasus was stabled. “We need this. We deserve this!”

Xavier looked nervously at the unicorns and hippogriffs around them. “Are you sure? I know you got the horse you always wanted, but I was never much into pony rides.”

“Yes, I’m sure and trust me, these are definitely not ponies.”

Just then the stable master, Arryn Bloodmaker, walked out of the tact room. He was a rather attractive older teen with golden hair, deep sky blue eyes and he seemed to even have a golden skin tone. “Who’re you? You can’t take your boyfriend flying, Princess! No matter what you think.”

“This is my brother,” she said, trying not to smile. “Can you get him on a hippogriff? We’re going flying.” Arryn gave her a focused look before nodding and finding a bridle for the half bird creature of myth.

“This is unreal,” Xavier said as Arya opened the stall with Persephone and led her out of the barn.

She came back to the tack room where she grabbed the bridle, pad and saddle for her pegasus. Xavier patted a unicorn while he waited for his bird beast to be ready, absorbing the happy feeling unicorns naturally gave off. He was smiling by the time Arryn called him over.

“Now, to fly one of these isn’t hard, but it will be an impromptu lesson since technically you’re not supposed to fly until you’ve taken my class. Anyways, when you make your introduction, be respectful and maintain eye contact until it looks away. If you look away first, he’ll never let you ride him,” Arryn explained before opening the stall door. “Also remember to keep your hand away from the beak. They don’t try to hurt you but they love to nip people they like so it’s best to avoid losing fingers to them.”

Xavier’s smile vanished and he was suddenly nervous. Arya had already mounted and was waiting in the nearby field, her pegasus trotting around like a show pony. The door opened and nothing could have prepared him for the creature that stood in front of him. At six four, Xavier was a tall guy and this hippogriff was looking him in the eye at his eye level.

Xavier fought the urge to look away from the beast, remembering what Arryn had just said. Finally the bird shook its head violently and bowed to him. Xavier shot a look to Arryn, who motioned to climb on, so Xavier threw one leg over, in front of the wings like his sister had on hers and centered himself. Suddenly the horse legs were galloping into the field and the wings spread out and with a jump, they took flight.

Xavier could feel every beat of the wings vibrate through his own body. His heart was beating fast and hard but he felt euphoric, higher than he’d ever felt, better than anything. The feathers under his hand were soft yet allowed him to have a good grasp on the eagle’s neck without slipping. Xavier’s mind cleared for the first time since arriving at the school and he grinned.

Arya watched from the ground as her brother flew the mythical creature around the field above her before joining him in the air. For almost an hour, the two guided their creatures in loops, racing and laughing, completely exhilarated when they landed. Climbing off the hippogriff, Xavier’s face was glowing.

His voice filled with excitement. “You were right, Ya! That was the best thing ever!”

“It’s the most amazing feeling,” she replied. “The first time I flew, I wanted you to be with me so badly but I didn’t know what I was doing at all and now I feel like I’m getting the hang of it.”

She guided the pegasus back into its stable, kissing its nose and whispering how much she loved her. Xavier handed the reins of the hippogriff to Arryn, thanking him.

“Of course, Your Highness,” Arryn replied. “Anytime you or the Princess wishes to ride, I will be available. I sleep in the loft overhead so I’m here day and night, except during my class on Fridays.”

“Maybe you could have Madame Michaels transfer me into it?” Xavier suggested. “I really want to do that as often as I can. Maybe get one of my own?” Arya shrugged. Why not? After all, she’d gotten a pegasus on her first day out, and no one had said anything.

“I’ll see what I can do. Come here tomorrow after your lessons and I’ll let you know what’s been decided.” Arryn walked away with the hippogriff, stabling it. Arya sighed as they left the barn.

“So twinning?” she joked.

Xavier’s mood lifted. “Definitely twinning,” he agreed.

As they walked back to the Academy, Xavier’s arm was wrapped around her shoulder, just like old times. Only a million times better. Xavier gave his sister a kiss on the top of her head.

Chapter Nine

The first couple of weeks at the Academy flew by, keeping the twins busy. Between their classes, riding in the early evenings and on weekends to visiting the Shadow Shoppes District to pick up treats for their familiars on the first Sunday they had off, they hardly had any time to think about Parent's weekend when it arrived, seemingly out of nowhere.

"I can't believe our parents arrive tomorrow," Bethany said to Amber, who smiled at her girlfriend adoringly. The group was gathered in the grand foyer, gathered in a crowded corner with oversized chairs, a couple beanbag chairs and a couch. "I can't wait to introduce you to my parents."

"You've already met my mother, so it's only fair," Amber laughed. "Are your parents coming, Girls?"

The Lastrange sisters shook their heads in seemingly synchronized movements.

"Our mother has melancholia and our father can't leave her without specialty care, which he says is far too complicated to set up for a weekend," Claire said, fighting to keep the sadness out of her voice. Meg hugged her closely.

"Sorry to hear that. Must be tough, Clarissa," Nathaniel Timberson said, sympathetically. "My Dad isn't coming either. He never does. Says it would change the dynamic for other families."

Nathaniel Timberson was an attractive white boy with tanned skin, sandy brown hair, light brown eyes and even, straight features. He'd taken to sitting with the group for the last week since he'd, finally, officially asked Clarissa out.

"It's not fun," Claire snorted at her sister's response. "What about you two? Is the Queen of Hell joining us?"

The twins looked at each other, unsure. They assumed she was but they hadn't been able to speak with her, despite how hard they'd both worked to get back home. Between astral projection and the pegasus's ability to teleport, they'd both failed. For some reason, they were unable to get back to their house and they couldn't figure out another way of communicating.

"We hope so," Arya finally answered. Xavier nodded.

"What about the King?" Shuri asked, holding hands with Baku, which filled Arya with jealousy that she channeled into over-friendliness.

"We have no idea," she said, cheerfully. "I guess we'll see! What about your father?"

"Yea, he'll be here. He's looking forward to meeting a true Healer and her 'deviant' son," she giggled, leaning into Baku, who grinned like someone who'd won a prize.

Arya smiled at them both before turning to Meg. "Is your father coming?"

Xavier could feel his twin's jealousy but didn't understand it. Baku was okay looking but Xavier couldn't really see what his sister saw in him.

"I think so," she replied. "We don't talk too much so I'm not sure. This or the next one." She hugged Claire again, resting her head on Claire's shoulder. "What about you, Leloni? Mortal Daddy coming?"

"Nope, just my mom. My dad can't afford to leave the island, and he has no idea magic exists. My mother has made it clear he wouldn't like the idea." She shrugged with a half smile. "I'm just glad she's coming. I miss her."

"Do you know what we're supposed to do to get ready?" Xavier asked, looking to Nathaniel as one of the Head students.

"Honestly, just clean your dorm room, be ready for inspection and if your parents do arrive, be ready to introduce them to all of your instructors. Oh and then, of course, there is the Dinner, which is an actual formal sit-down meal with speeches from Madame Dupont, the Head Sorcerer and

Head Witch, maybe a representative of the Student Council, probably Nessa, if she gets her way."

"Oh that'll be fun," Xavier said sarcastically to Arya, who snorted.

"He probably won't even show, Xavy," Arya said hopefully. "Mom will come and we'll be us again." Xavier sighed, hoping she was right but didn't respond.

"Is He really that bad?" Nathaniel asked, his arm around Clarissa's chair.

"We've only met him once, so we really don't know," Arya explained. "But it wasn't a good first impression." Xavier snorted. "Okay, it was a terrible first impression," she laughed sadly.

"My Dad's pretty hardcore too. I think it's a king thing," Nathaniel suggested.

"Yea, because Alpha of werewolves in a local area is exactly the same thing as King of Hell," Theo had come walking up with Caliope, who seemed upset.

"What was that, orphan boy?" Nathaniel retorted.

"I'm not afraid of you, wolf," Theo replied, his voice menacing. Nathaniel growled.

Oh knock it off," Xavier said, getting up angrily and storming up the stairs to the dorms.

Arya was taken aback by his behavior but didn't say anything. Theo gave a nasty look to Nathaniel, whispered something in Caliope's ear and walked off, following Xavier. Nathaniel looked at the table in embarrassment and stormed out of the Academy, presumably to the North woods to go full wolf.

"Ugh," Caliope sat down in Xavier's empty spot next to Arya and sighed. "So I broke up with Oscar," she sighed sadly, referring to her boyfriend and Head Immortal, who had been making excuses for weeks about avoiding her. "For good."

"Good for you," Bethany and Amber said at the same time while Caliope's sisters cheered.

"Finally! You threw the whole boy out!" Shuri said laughing, while Baku took that as his cue to leave, kissing Shuri softly on the lips.

Arya pretended not to notice. She squeezed Caliope's hand. "Amazing news!"

“Yea, I guess.” Caliope sank lower in her seat. “I just feel like such an idiot. He was only dating me to say he’d been with one of us.”

“Gross,” Arya replied. “Want me to Hex him? I’m getting pretty decent at spell casting. I don’t want to brag or anything but I’ve been practicing outside of class and gave Cliff’s bully a case of the warts yesterday.” She laughed as Clarissa squealed.

“You didn’t,” Bethany laughed so hard she snorted.

“I did,” Arya laughed. “I keep waiting to be called down to the headmistress’s office but it hasn’t happened yet. I’m pretty sure she knows.”

“Duh, Princess,” Meg said, reminding Arya.

It had been a while since anyone referred to her by her rank outside of the Shadow Shoppes District, but every once in a while, one of the girls reminded her that she wasn’t a typical student. The rules weren’t strictly enforced with the twins as with everyone else, which Arya discovered the first night she broke curfew while out riding Persephone. Madame Dupont had simply given her one demerit and sent her to bed when she caught Arya sneaking in.

“Right, right, right,” she laughed awkwardly.

Leloni sighed.“Changing the subject, I wish Jimmy would do more than just flirt with me.”

Leloni had a well known crush on the immortal boy but he seemed oblivious and she wasn’t brave enough to talk to him without a group of people around.

“Now that boy is an idiot if I ever met one,” Shuri replied. “Obviously he’s too stupid to realize when a queen is interested.”

“Shuri, it’s not as if boys are mind-readers,” Meg retorted.

“As if you would know,” Shuri clapped back. “Have you ever even kissed a boy?”

“Watch it, Shuri,” Bethany growled.

She had the decency to look abashed momentarily. “Sorry, sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Maybe you should just ask him. Isn’t there a dance in two weeks?” Arya asked, defusing the atmosphere. Amber, who had been unusually silent, sighed with relief.

“Yes! That’s perfect! You can ask him and tell him it’s a group thing and we’ll all go together! That way you can take the pressure off!” Amber

said enthusiastically, but Leloni didn't seem to go for it.

"I don't think so. I want him to ask me, the way it should be…" Her voice trailed off.

"Wow, old school. No judgement!" Meg exclaimed, throwing her hands up. "Just feels like an old-fashioned concept.

"It is," Leloni nodded, agreeing, tucking a loose strand of shiny black hair behind her ear. "But it's the way I was raised and honestly, it is more romantic if the guy asks the girl." She sighed heavily. "All my favorite movies have the guy chase after the girl."

"Ugh!" Caliope groaned. "Just listen to us talk about boys like a bunch of Mortal girls. I'm going to go up to our dorm, Sisters…" She took a deep breath and smiled. "I just need a shower and some sleep." Getting up, she didn't make eye contact with anyone around her and headed towards the stairs. "Good night!"

"Well, I guess that means it's bedtime," Claire said standing up, kissing Meg before leaving the group. Clarissa followed without a word, waving goodnight before running to catch up to her sister on the stairs.

"Maybe we should get to bed too," Amber suggested to Arya, who yawned in response. "Guess that's a yes," Amber laughed as Arya nodded, laughing.

She stretched her arms as she stood. "Goodnight, Ladies," Arya said, following the Lastrange sisters up the stairs. She turned just in time to see Amber kiss Bethany and whisper something in her ear. They were such a cute couple. Arya wished she had someone to kiss too.

★★★

The next morning, the whole school seemed to be scrambling to ready itself for the Parents' Arrivals, which would happen two hours after the end of breakfast hour. Arya had picked a long-sleeved, deep forest green dress that reached her knees the weekend before at the Shadow Shoppes District while Xavier wore his uniform, not caring enough to worry about dressing up. By the time Arya woke up, Amber had left, leaving a note saying she was helping her mother. Arya showered, dressed and went down to breakfast to see Xavier sitting alone, holding a sealed envelope, just staring at it. His

breakfast remained uneaten and Arya could feel the anxiety pouring off of her twin.

"What's that?" Arya said, sitting down. Magically her breakfast appeared before her and she popped a grape in her mouth. "Hello! Xavy? Earth to my Xavier!?" She waved her hand in front of his face until Xavier jerked and then jumped slightly in surprise.

"Oh, Ya! You scared me." He laughed. "I'm sorry. I was distracted. We got this," he handed her the envelope, which felt thicker and glossier than the standard ones.

It was labeled:

To Arya & Xavier Morningstar

"Who is it from?" She asked, turning the envelope over in her own hands, feeling the gloss of their names.

"I think… our father," he answered, his face as still as possible, revealing nothing of the fear he was feeling. Arya sighed. "I don't want to know what it says. Is that wrong?"

"Well, no… but there is no sense in waiting. Might as well open it and see what it says," she replied. Carefully ripping the seal, she glided her finger through, opening the envelope with precision. Pulling out the equally thick paper inside, Arya unfolded the letter. It read:

To the Morningstar Children,

Your father, His Royal Majesty Lucifer Morningstar, will be attending your first Parent's Weekend at the Academy of the Night. Please be sure to greet him at promptly 10 o'clock in the grand foyer, freshly washed and properly attired.

From the Desk of,
Oleander
King of Hell's Personal Assistant

"Oh…" Arya let out as she read it.

Xavier grabbed the letter and groaned. "Noooooo… He doesn't even like us."

Arya shook her head. “What about Cliff? Or Gwen? Or the older one? Is he even concerned about them? Or is it just us?”

“I don’t care. I’ll find Cliff and you get Zaya to bring Gwen,” Xavier said defiantly.

“What about mom?” she asked, remembering that their mother had said she wouldn’t miss a weekend.

“Crap. I forgot about mom.” He put his face in his hands and leaned over his breakfast. “Don’t you think she knows that there are other Morningstar kids out there?”

“Well, sure, but do you really think she’d like to face them face-to-face? So to speak,” Arya couldn’t imagine what her mother might feel when forced to deal with her father’s Nephilim children, but she thought she’d feel terrible if it was her.

Xavier considered Arya’s point and shrugged. “She should have told us more about ourselves if she wanted us to care about her feelings.”

“Xavy.”

Xavier’s face contorted in disgust. His anger towards their mother had seemed to grow during their time at the Academy, entirely unrelenting. “So go ask Zaya to bring Gwen.”

She sighed and nodded. It wasn’t worth making him angry with her again to defend their mother, she reasoned, because she was mad at her too.

“Fine,” Arya said, finishing her breakfast and handing the letter back to her brother. “But warn Cliff, okay? He doesn’t know our father at all and you and I both know that Lucifer is far from kind or compassionate to anyone vulnerable.”

“Yea, you’re right.” He tossed the letter in the center of the table on his uneaten breakfast and watched as his breakfast and the letter disappeared as the 8 o’clock bell tolled.

★★★

At ten til ten, the Morningstar children gathered in the grand foyer that had been cleared of the overstuffed chairs and sofas, leaving an empty room that had rapidly filled with students awaiting their parents. The Wolves gathered in the southwest corner of the room, while the Immortal Vampiric children gathered in the southeast. The witches and warlocks mingled on either side

of the northern entrance while Madame Dupont, Madoc Weatherly and Sabrina Michaels all waited, wearing all black, although Madoc's beard was now pink and his knit cap he always wore was bright orange.

Arya watched as Madame Dupont attempted to convince Madoc to remove his cap, or at least dull down the brightness, but from what she could tell, he refused. Sabrina Michaels was fighting back laughter at whatever defense Madoc was mounting while Madame Dupont looked tortured and finally gave up, throwing her hands up and turning away from the Warlock. Arya smiled and looked around, enjoying her people watching. She was surprised to see Nathaniel Timberson and his younger brothers gathered together. Walking over to where he stood, she waved at his younger brothers.

"Nathaniel, I thought your father wasn't coming?" She smiled at the younger wolves, who were now wrestling behind their brother.

"He wasn't. Until he got word that your father was coming," sighed Nathaniel. "Now he wants to make formal introductions. He'll probably spend the whole day trying to get close to the King, to show he's respected, but…"

Nathaniel shrugged and fell silent. Arya didn't know what it was like to be an Alpha's son but she did know what it was like to be disappointed in a parent.

"I'm sorry, Nathaniel," she replied. "We were only told this morning that he was coming. And not by him."

"Yea…" He cut off by the doorbell ringing.

Madame Dupont opened the door to reveal the first set of parents, Nathaniel's. An older, much more rugged and scarred version of Nathaniel walked in with a woman following, her eyes downcast and the shadow of a bruise on her cheek she'd tried, and failed, to cover with makeup. Arya's heart ached in that moment for Nathaniel as she returned to her siblings. She fought the urge to watch the interaction between the family and turned to her little brother instead.

"Cliff, are you excited or nervous?" She was curious how he was feeling.

"Nervous," he replied. "What if he doesn't like me?" Cliff stared at his shoes, picking at his fingers.

Arya bent down and hugged him tightly. "Nonsense!"

Xavier snorted. “He doesn’t like me, so you won’t be the only one.” Arya shot daggers at her brother with a look. He cleared his throat. “But I am sure he will like you. You’re definitely way cooler than me.”

“Absolutely. Xavy is such a loser compared to you,” Arya agreed, happy her twin had taken her hint.

Xavier stuck his tongue out and Cliff giggled at his older brother and sister. Arya stood back up, holding Cliff’s shoulder, which wasn’t much below her own.

“You’ll do great, Cliff. Don’t worry.”

“What about your mom? Will she like me? Zaya said she’s like my stepmom. Is that true?” Cliff’s boundless curiosity threw Xavier for a moment but Arya didn’t skip a beat.

“Of course, Cliff! She will love you! She always said there’s never too much love or too many people to give it to.”

“Ha, that’s right! Family is who you make it and it’s who you love. We love you and she’ll love you too, Little Man,” Xavy added, ruffling Cliff’s dark hair, resulting in the boy trying to fix it by flattening it down however he could.

Arya giggled and turned him so she could fix it for him. In that moment, they were just as they were meant to be, siblings. The doorbell rang again.

Madame Dupont opened the door to reveal several sets of parents, who poured through the door. They hugged and kissed their children. Vampires fathers glided through the grand foyer to their immortal children. Wolf mothers wrapping their children in their arms, complaining about how skinny they were. Arya glanced at her watch. It was five til now. The doorbell continued to ring every minute or so, with several groups of parents entering each time.

Time flew by while Arya and Xavier anxiously awaited the arrival of their parents. Finally, Madame Dupont opened the door revealing their mother, Lilith, looking every bit the queen. She had chosen a strapless, black dress patterned with bright colored flowers. The skirt billowed and flowed around her in the light breeze. Her fiery red hair was pulled back and pinned up in an elegant braided bun and she’d kept her face bare of makeup, using only a touch of lipstick and maybe some mascara to brighten her eyes. Large diamond studs adorned her ears, adding just the right

amount of sparkle. Her skin glimmered with pink undertones and her bright green eyes seemed to almost glow.

"Mommy!" Arya involuntarily squealed, running through the room to her mother's arms "Mommy!" Her cries were muffled in her mother's neck. "I missed you," she pulled back at last.

Her mother kissed her forehead and took Arya's hand. "I missed you too, my sweet girl!"

Together, they walked through the grand foyer and the crowd of people, who had all fallen silent to stare at their Queen. Lilith gracefully glided to where Xavier was standing while Arya did her best to imitate her mother's smooth gait. Xavier was looking more vulnerable than he had since they'd arrived.

"Xavy, I missed you," their mother whispered to her son, opening her arms to embrace her son.

Xavier's anger broke in that moment and he rushed to squeeze his mother's much smaller frame and kissed her cheek. "I miss you, Mom."

"Mrs. Xavier's Mom?" Cliff said, tentatively. Lilith turned and lowered herself to meet the boy at his level.

"Yes, Clifton Morningstar."

"You know who I am?" He looked surprised. "How?"

She smiled in return, but said nothing as she stood up. She looked at the twins. "Where is your father?"

Xavier just shrugged. His mask of anger returned to cover his anxiety.

"He said to be here at exactly 10 and he's late," Arya complained. "I'm not a fan, Mom. Not. A. Fan. "

"Queen Lilith?" a voice from behind them spoke up.

Arya turned to see Nathaniel's father with Nathaniel and his brothers standing at attention behind him. Her mother smiled slightly but otherwise, she kept her emotions buried deep.

"Yes, Zachariah?"

In an instant, Xavier and Arya watched as their mom transformed from the loving, doting mother to Lilith, the Queen of Hell, standing taller, stronger, more confident than Arya had ever seen her, which was saying something since Arya had never known her mother to be anything other than confident.

“My queen!” The Alpha kneeled to Lilith, who kept her face perfectly neutral. “I wish to introduce you to my son, Head Wolf of the Academy, Nathaniel and his brothers, Gabriel, Matthew and Samuel.”

Each of the boys bowed low to the ground, rising after a few moments. Xavier and Arya exchanged awkward looks, but stood taller and still, understanding that the moment was filled with importance, even if they didn’t fully understand the significance. Lilith nodded to each boy as he rose up, standing at attention once again.

“They are fine looking wolves,” the Queen replied, her voice cold and uninterested. “You must be proud, Zachariah.”

The Alpha bowed and smiled, leading his sons away. Arya saw Nathaniel’s mother in the corner, sitting at one of the few chairs remaining in the grand foyer lined against the walls.

Lilith momentarily shed the queen from her face and looked at her children. “This is why I raised you amongst Mortals. In this world, we are always on show.”

Just then, the doorbell rang again and Madame Dupont opened the door. In all his angelically devilish glory, Lucifer Morningstar stood there in a black tuxedo with a satin burgundy bowtie and somehow, he looked every bit the King of Hell without a crown or devil horns. Suddenly, as if in a movie, the entire room swept into a low bow, leaving only Lilith and the twins standing. Even Cliff and Zaya stooped low to the ground.

Arya looked around at the room and the people subjugating themselves for her father’s approval. A surreal feeling filled her, disconnecting her from the moment. She observed without emotion, while her twin seemed overwhelmed, from anger to sadness to pride that seemed to triumph over his other feelings. His face was contorted in his struggle to cover what he felt. Arya reached out, taking his hand and felt as her touch calmed him. He glanced at her gratefully, before fixing his attention on their father, still standing at the door, the morning light giving him an aura of importance.

“Welcome, Your Majesty,” Madame Dupont said from her low bow. “The academy is yours, my king.”

“Rise,” Lucifer replied, seemingly bored. “Go about your agenda, Madame Dupont,” Lucifer said. “I am not here to inspect this Academy. I am here to see my children.” He met Lilith’s gaze smirking. “And, my queen.”

Arya heard her mother take a deep, steadying breath, the way she'd taught Arya when her nerves got the best of her, but her face revealed nothing. Instead, a pleasant smile masked whatever she felt, and the queen gave a slight bow to the king, Arya and Xavier awkwardly following their mother's lead.

The crowd rose at once and the room seemed to roar as the talking returned. Arya could feel the eyes of everyone in the grand foyer on her family, causing her to lean into Xavier even closer. As Lucifer strolled over to them, she could feel her heartbeat racing, her blood pressure rising. Arya could feel the electricity in her veins and the static on her skin intensifying. Suddenly, Xavier grabbed her hand and the magic that had been building up due to her unspoken fears receded. Xavier seemed to be able to neutralize her the same way she calmed him, as if they were two parts of a whole coming together, balancing both sides.

Lucifer strolled through the crowd, who bowed as he passed, stopping directly in front of Lilith, taking her hand and kissing it. Arya's fingers were digging into Xavier's hand, causing him to wince, almost imperceivable to anyone watching. Even so, Xavier didn't take his hand away, letting her continue to maim him as their first family event was about to begin.

"My Beautiful Queen," Lucifer said, bowing slightly to Lilith, who tipped her head and bobbed slightly.

"My king," she replied, her hand waving her children forward. "May I present your children, Xavier and Arya, the heirs of our kingdom." She paused before smiling warmly at Cliff.
"And, of course your son, Clifton, and daughter, Gwendolyn with her Nurse, the lovely Zaya Smith."

Zaya had been hiding behind the family, crouched and holding Gwen balanced on the floor. Standing, she shifted uncomfortably as she brought Gwen forward to meet her father.

"Children," Lucifer's eyes turned red and glowed with suppressed anger, clearly upset that his bastard Nephilim were greeting him in such a public place.

Xavier knew his mission to upset Lucifer had succeeded and felt vindicated. He was relieved to see that his father wouldn't publicly shame Cliff for being there with his mother around.

“You look healthy and well,” the devil said loudly enough for the room to hear. “I am pleased with the Academy’s care of you.”

“We do our best, Your Majesty,” said Madame Dupont, coming up from behind the King. “Your children are all excelling in their studies, even Miss Gwendolyn is exceeding expectations for a Nephilim child, nearly walking already.”

Madame Dupont looked unusually anxious, her normal poised confidence replaced with oddly nervous energy. Even her voice seemed an octave higher than normal.

“Yes, indeed,” Lucifer replied, disinterested in the news about Gwen.

Arya reached out, taking Gwen from Zaya, who handed her over with a grateful look before bowing and retreating behind the crowd.

“Don’t you think she’s just perfect, Father?” Arya asked, the last word filled with mild sarcasm that was barely detectable but she noticed Lucifer’s nostrils flare and smirked to herself. “I just adore her. I’ve always wanted a baby sister.”

Arya kissed Gwen’s chubby cheek. Gwen’s round face burst into a giant adorable and toothless smile.

“Just like Cliff and I have also been getting to know each other,” Xavier added, picking up on Arya’s mood and fanning the flames. “Right, Little Buddy? We even picked up our Familiars at the same time, although Cliff’s is just his friend.”

Cliff smiled happily at Lucifer, who remained silent, his eyes narrowing at the twins.

“Yea, and Xavier is teaching me all about the mortal world,” Cliff said, completely unaware of the tension. “I’m learning about these things called sports. Did you know there are lots of different kinds?”

“That’s wonderful, Clifton,” Lilith smiled at the boy, recognizing Cliff’s eagerness to connect to his father and offering what she could. “Did Xavier tell you that he’s a very talented athlete in the mortal sport hockey?”

“Yes, my queen!” Cliff said happily.

“You may call me Lilith, if you like,” Lilith offered. Cliff launched his arms around her, hugging the queen tightly.

“Yes, Lilith!” The boy’s pure smile Arya loved her new brother even more.

Lucifer's patience, however, had run out. "Nephilim, remove the children.

Zaya materialized out of nowhere and scooped Gwen out of Arya's arms. She took Cliff's hand and led him away. He looked confused and hurt. Arya caught his eye and winked, which made Cliff smile and follow Zaya without struggle.

"Now that you've had your fun, let's begin this… Parents' Weekend."

"Fun?" Xavier said, clearly revving up for a fight. "You think that was fun?"

"I would love to see your dorms," Lilith interrupted, staring at her children and ignoring Lucifer. "I know they turned the demerit system off so siblings would be able to visit with their families in private. So who is first?"

"The boy," Lucifer decided. His voice left no room for discussion.

Xavier glanced at Arya, who shrugged in response. It really didn't matter and it wasn't worth the fight, she thought. Xavier nodded and lead his parents and sister up the stairs to the dorm room he shared with Theo. Knocking on the door in an attempt to give Theo some warning, Xavier opened it to see his roommate standing in the center of the room, waiting for them with a platter of meat and cheese in his hands. Xavier cocked his eyebrow at his roommate, grinned but said nothing. His parents followed him into the room, with Arya trailing. Theo bowed low, careful not to drop the tray of food.

"Your Majesties, I am honored by your presence," he said in a deeply formal voice that made Arya snicker silently. He glanced at her and fought a smile before standing straight again. "I prepared you a small snack with tea." He pointed to a kettle with four cups on the small table in the sitting area. "I'll be in the hall if you need anything." He hurried into the hall, closing the door behind him on the way.

"That's my roommate, Theo," Xavier said after a moment of silence.

"That's your manservant, Theodore," Lucifer replied, coldly. "He is not your friend and do not treat him as such."

Arya's mouth fell open and Xavier opened his to reply but to both her children's surprise, Lilith spoke first.

"Oh, Lucifer, do shut up. I've had quite enough of your attitude." Lucifer gazed at his queen, studying her as if she was a mystery he still

didn't understand. "This is my weekend with my children. If you want a weekend with your heirs, come back another time. Otherwise, do shut up and let them fill us in on their lives."

Arya began to laugh, her emotions bubbling up and magic prickling at her skin like static. Xavier grabbed her hand centering her again. She smiled at him. "Thanks, Xavy."

"Interesting," Lilith commented as she sat down in the middle of the couch. "I was wondering what your gifts were, Xavy."

Xavier sat next to her. "I mean, I can Astral Project but I don't really excel in spell-casting. "Arya is much better at that."

"No, you wouldn't." Lilith replied, touching his hand lightly, nodding as she felt her own magic recede slightly. "You seem to be an Arcane Void… your touch, with practice and focus, renders someone's powers and magic, essentially, null and void. You'll have to master much more difficult spells, but mundane magic won't be your forte, so to speak."

"Arcane Voids are rare… Are you certain, Lilith?" Lucifer's voice was warmer, more interested in Xavier now. He was seated in an armchair on Theo's side, sipping a cup of tea, which seemed like a strange thing for the Devil to be doing, Arya thought as she sat in the armchair opposite her father.

Lilith glared at Lucifer. "Magic is my element, Archangel."

Lucifer growled in response but Lilith wasn't concerned as she rolled her eyes.

"What about you, Arya? Have you discovered your unique gift yet?"

"Other than magic that boils over occasionally? Not really… but I do have a Pegasus for a familiar, which is pretty amazing…" Arya felt strangely normal in that moment, talking to her parents together about magic and mythical creatures. Xavier leaned into their mother, using her shoulder as a pillow, resting on her like he had done so many times before.

"We go riding once in a while," Xavier added. "I really like riding hippogriffs, but Arya loves her pony and refuses to try one."

"A Pegasus is a powerful familiar," Lucifer sounded bemused. "I used to have one myself, but I released him into the wild many centuries ago to breed. Perhaps your Pegasus is a descendent of mine."

"How'd you get it to teleport where you want?" Arya asked Lucifer, despite herself. Turning to her mother, she continued. "I can't get home."

Lilith laughed awkwardly. “That would be my fault, Arya… I put a ring of protection around our house. No magical entry allowed, portals, astral project and teleportation are completely incapable of penetrating the dome. But I didn’t mean to keep you two out.”

Lucifer’s voice had hints of laughter in it. “Just me, my queen?”

“Obviously, my king. If you were capable of being trusted, I would put down my wards but I don’t know what other spies you’ve had in my home.” Lilith said referring to Chewy’s betrayal of the family and it was clear she hadn’t forgiven the old diner owner.

“Probably for the best. We don’t want the children wandering away from their studies to play mortal anymore,” Lucifer retorted.

“They were never playing mortal, Lucifer. They were living a normal childhood, as per our agreement.” Lilith’s strained calm was breaking. Her frustration showed.

“Normal for who?” Lucifer put his tea cup down. “Not the Prince or Princess of Hell, certainly.” Arya’s eyes darted back and forth between her parents; her nerves fluttering again.

“Mom, how about we go check out Arya’s dorm? Her roommate is hilarious and last night, she baked cookies for everyone, so I think she’ll probably have a few left over, right, Ya?” Xavier flawlessly defused the situation and distracted his mother with treats, a tried and true tactic he’d used many times before. He stood and held his hand out to his mother.

“Oh? What kind?” Lilith asked, getting up with Xavier’s help.

Arya followed, not looking back to see whether or not her father was coming too. As they escorted their mother down the stairs, Arya was aware of the eyes on them. Their mother, the queen, walked with pure grace, seeming to glide like a vampire rather than step by step. Xavier tried to match her pace but felt his steps were short and clipped, unlike Arya’s natural gait, which forced her to walk twice as fast to keep up. Behind them, they heard their father’s footsteps echoing their own up the stairs to Arya’s dorm.

Amber must have heard them coming, because she opened the door just as Xavier reached to knock. Wearing an oversized, deep violet sweater that reached her knees with black leggings, Amber was dressed for comfort but, somehow, still looked ready to entertain the Queen and King.

“Welcome to our room, Your Majesties,” she said as Lucifer entered the threshold to their room. “I am Amber, Arya’s handmaiden and friend. My mother, Grace Marie Johan, would like to personally thank you for all you have done to further my education and give my life purpose and my family honor.”

Arya was struck once again by how formal her roommate could be, which, in this moment, Arya was grateful for. At least her father wouldn’t be able to demean her.

“Thank you, Amber,” Lilith said, sitting in an armchair this time. Lucifer sat down opposite her, while Arya and Xavier remained standing. “You’ve done a wonderful job of decorating your shared space, Girls.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. The Princess and I have made some compromises in regards to decor,” Amber replied.

Arya laughed, intertwining her arm with Amber and leading her to the couch, where they sat at the same time. “What she means is when I arrived, she had a lumpy couch and I insisted we get a new one.”

“You said your mother is Grace Marie Johan? I believe she’s an herbalist?” Lilith asked Amber, who nodded, grinning. “Yes, I remember her. She asked for a blessing about seventeen years ago. She was having trouble conceiving and her husband had been unsuccessful with other rituals.”

Her smile vanished. “Yes, my father was a mundane warlock, my queen. He was unable to perform any magic.”

“Until he sold his daughter to our father,” Xavier blurted out.

Lilith shot a glare at an uninterested Lucifer. “I’m sorry to hear that, Amber. I am sure my daughter will always treat you with the respect of a peer and friend.”

“Of course,” Arya said, almost shocked her mother would suggest otherwise.

“Oh, we’re great friends, Your Majesty,” Amber said, cheerfully. “We eat almost every meal together, and we go riding once a week, just us, which is so much fun.”

“It really is!” Arya agreed.

“Prince Xavier is trying to convince us to ride the hippogriffs but they bite!” Amber exclaimed.

“No, they peck,” Xavier corrected, laughing.

“Ridiculous,” Lucifer finally said bitterly. “The Prince and Princess are acting foolish with their slaves. I won’t have this nonsense. I’d rather sell them off than watch my children befriend their underlings.”

“Don’t call them slaves,” Xavier shouted.

Arya gasped, “No!”

“You will do no such thing, Lucifer!” Lilith warned him. "Or I will take our children and I will cloak them from you so you will never find them, Archangel.”

Lilith stood, her face reddened with anger. “I am the First Witch, and I will not allow you to control MY children.”

Arya was in awe of her mother.

“Threaten my children or their friends again, my dear king and I assure you, I will make you regret it.”

Lucifer’s eyes flashed red with fury and he stood. “My queen, you vastly underestimate my power. I may not have access to the Goddess’s magic but I am King of Hell with countless demons and dozens of Nephilim at my command.”

Lilith stood mere inches from his face. “Children, leave.”

Lucifer said nothing but his eyes were glowing with anger and he seemed to grow larger. Lilith’s dress rippled from a show of power, her rage feeding her magic. Her breathing became ragged but Lucifer’s stayed steady, his eyes the only sign of his power. Scrambling off the couch, Arya pulled Amber out of the dorm room. Xavier followed closely behind. The oak door slammed behind them and with a click, they knew it had been locked.

★★★

Amber and Arya waited anxiously in the grand foyer, sitting together, staring at the staircase, saying nothing. Xavier had chosen to stay upstairs, fighting to break in. He thought he would hear yelling or screaming, but it was eerily silent on the other side of the door.

“Mom!” He yelled out. Some people peaked into the hall to see him standing there, pounding at the door and whispered amongst themselves. He didn’t care and ignored them, only worried about his mother. Obviously she was powerful but she hadn’t kept them hidden from him for sixteen years

because he was a good man. After about twenty minutes, his voice was hoarse and his arms were tired. There was no breaking in, he decided, slumping down against the door. He'd just have to wait.

Finally, about an hour after he'd given up, his mother opened the door, causing him to fall onto the floor. Rubbing the back of his head, he sat up. "Oof," he groaned. "Hey, Mom… Everything okay?"

"Your father and I were just having a discussion," Lilith said, helping Xavier get up.

"Interesting name for what that was, Wife," Lucifer commented, walking ahead of them.

"He's decided he will attempt to be a father and not simply the King." Lilith ignored Lucifer and focused on her son, looking around for her daughter. "Where is your sister?"

"She's downstairs, with Amber. They're worried," Xavier shot a look at his father, whose red eyes had returned to their normal deep, dark pools of black. His face was expressionless, almost bored.

"There's nothing to worry about," Lilith reassured her son. "Lucifer has agreed to free Theodore and Amber, releasing them to their parents."

"That's great!" Xavier exclaimed. "It was all kinds of messed up to own another person."

"I understand completely," Lilith replied, touching his arm softly. "Lucifer has chosen to live in isolation from the mortal world and lives in a time long gone past."

Lucifer grunted and turned to his wife and son. "They will find the Academy an expensive endeavor without my patronage," Lucifer sneered. "Tuition alone will have them moving to one of the lesser academies."

"What?" Xavier struggled to keep his cool. "You can't make them leave after forcing them here!"

Lilith pressed her hand firmly on Xavier's forearm and smiled at her son, drawing his attention to her.

"Don't worry, my sweet boy. That's quite alright. I will sponsor them, my king." She paused for a moment. Her eyes twinkled as she smiled. "As the Queen of Hell, I assume I am granted that privilege."

Lucifer's nostril's flared as he nodded reluctantly. Lilith clapped her hands together as Xavier sighed with relief.

“Of course, you are welcome to do as you wish, my queen,” Lucifer replied, dryly, making an about-face, heading down the stairs.

“Wonderful. Let’s join your sister,” Lilith entwined her arm with her son’s much larger one and allowed him to escort her back to the grand foyer. Whatever Lilith was doing to control Lucifer, Xavier hoped she would manage to keep it up.

“I need to inspect the Academy,” Lucifer said as they entered the foyer. “I will meet you all at dinner.”

He bowed his head slightly as Lilith bobbed, tipping her’s in return. Xavier watched as his father stormed away, his anger still palpable. Arya and Amber watched the scene and shared an uncertain and worried glance.

“What happened, Mom?” Xavier asked as his father went out of sight. “I didn’t hear anything.

“Of course you didn’t,” Lilith smiled, walking up to her daughter. “I am no basic witch.”

Xavier snorted while Arya laughed and told Amber about the mortal reference. “Mom,” Xavier complained, trying not to sound whiny. “Please tell me. I deserve to know."

“Not about this, you don’t. The minute the door locked, a privacy spell fell into place because everything that happened was not meant for your ears or eyes.” Lilith’s motherly voice was filled with no room for debate but Xavier persisted.

“Mom! Come on,” he protested. “You’ve kept us in the dark for our entire lives. You could at least tell us what your power is.”

“He’s got a point,” Arya added, tucking a loose red curl behind her ear.

Amber stood quickly, taking the moment to walk away, leaving them in relative privacy in the grand foyer. Lilith sat down in Amber’s vacated spot and Xavier took a spot on the floor nearby.

“You could at least tell us about you. We’ve heard the myth and legend of Lilith… and we were raised with the doctor-mom version… but… but we don’t know who you are,” Arya persuaded.

“At all.” Xavier snorted.

Lilith sighed heavily and nodded. “You’re right. You do deserve to know where you come from, who you come from.”

“So tell us,” Arya begged softly, squeezing her mother’s hand. “Please.”

“Please!” Xavier took his mother’s other hand and the three sat there, holding hands, for a moment before Lilith took a deep breath and began.

“I am the First Woman, made from the Goddess’s own mind. She also made me the First Witch, with access to what we call magic.” She paused, inhaling deeply. “My power is the access to the Goddess’s power. Unlike most of the witches and warlocks, I am the Original and that makes me different,” she sighed. “It makes you both different.”

“What do you mean?” Arya whispered.

“You are both the children of the First Witch and the King of Hell, the Fallen Angel of God,” Lilith tried to explain. “It makes you the only two of your kind. Part Nephilim and part witch.”

“Yea, we knew that already,” Xavier said impatiently.

“What are we?” Arya asked, ignoring her brother’s attitude.

“There isn’t a name, my loves.” Lilith took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “You are the first of your kind,” she repeated, looking back and forth at her children. “We have no idea the power you’ll wield. We only know that you are duality incarnate. Lucifer is God’s creation and I am the Goddess’s. Our union, you…” She trailed off, her face draining of color. “Baan?”

Xavier and Arya rapidly turned in the direction their mother was staring. Madame Dupont was holding the door open to a very tall man with velvety brown skin, dark almost black eyes, chiseled features, square jawed with a completely shaved head, wearing a white suit, white tie with white wingtips on his feet. Madame Dupont smiled as she greeted the latest arrival. Next to him was a teenaged boy that seemed to look like the younger version of the stranger himself with the same mahogany tone, same eyes like dark pools and the same shaved head. The resemblance would have been uncanny if Xavier and Arya didn’t also look like clones of their parents too.

“Baan?” Arya gasped, staring at the man. “Like our brother Baan?” Lilith could only nod, her mouth agape, staring at her long lost son.

“Damn, our genetics are strong,” Xavier muttered and Arya snorted.

Just then, Baan looked in their direction and something resembling a smile appeared on his face. Xavier sat up straighter and Arya leaned into her mother. There was something dangerous about the look in Baan’s black eyes that made her afraid. A moment later, his young companion looked in

their direction, causing the hair on the back of the twins' necks to rise up, giving them chills.

Chapter Ten

The world's first werewolf stood in the entrance to the Academy of Night and everyone at the academy seemed to go about their lives as if this was nothing unusual. Madame Dupont was introducing herself and welcoming the boy, who looked to be about sixteen, completely unaware of the tension surrounding her. After his initial smile at their group, Baan pretended to forget Lilith, whose breath became slow and shallow, was even there.

"Mom?" Arya asked. Her magic unravelled itself through her body, stretching out with her fear. Xavier sensed her anxiety. He moved to couch, placing his hand on Arya's upper back to help her center herself, while his face betrayed his own internal freak out.

"Baan?" Lilith whispered like a prayer, every now and then. She hadn't seen her son in centuries but there he was less than twenty feet from her, refusing to look at her at all. Her heart yearned to hold him, to hug him once more, but she knew he would never allow her touch. She knew he blamed her for his Father's absence and the curse that sired a species. "Baan?"

If he heard her, as Arya suspected he did as he was a werewolf with superior hearing, he was choosing to ignore her.

"Mom, you should go talk to him," Arya encouraged, but Lilith simply shook her head and turned back around.

“He wouldn’t want that,” Lilith whispered, more to herself than to her children. “He has hated me since I wrote the curse that turned him into a wolf as punishment.”

“Wait! You created the werewolf curse? That’s so not what they teach here!” Xavier exclaimed. “They say it was a coven of his children he’d abandoned.”

Lilith nodded, her gaze cast downward. “It was, but I gave them the ritual…” she sighed, “and I was the one who bound him to the moon.” She looked up, her eyes filled with torment. “I can’t explain. It was the only choice.”

“You don’t have to,” Xavier replied, reaching across Arya to hold his mother’s hand.

“Did you also curse Aya?” Arya asked, half twisted in her seat to keep Baan in her peripheral sight.

“Oh no,” Lilith protested. “That was all Aya. She was desperate for immortality. She performed blood magic and her curse to live off of living blood was a consequence of the dark magic she sought to control.”

“Did she know she’d be able to make other vampires when she did it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t believe she did,” Lilith explained sadly. “She was born mortal. Of all my children, she was destined to grow old, have children and die, as life was intended, but she wanted to live.”

“Oh,” Arya replied. “I guess I get that. I wouldn’t know what to do if it were me, but I think… maybe I’d want to live too.” She sounded uncertain but she was calm. Xavier was staying close so she felt completely in control.

“So what’s with Baan? Does he hate you now or what?” Xavier was never one for mincing words and in that moment, his bluntness conveyed his impatience.

“Perhaps. Most likely,” Lilith replied, nodding, avoiding eye contact with her children. “And he swore he would find a way to punish me.”

“Punish you?” Arya whispered. “For what?”

“How?” Xavier demanded. “Why?”

Lilith shrugged, somehow regally, still very aware that they had an audience, something it was obvious the twins had forgotten. “People are watching us.”

The twins straightened up and turned back around. Baan had succeeded in not looking in their direction as Madame Dupont led him and his son around the grand foyer, explaining the school and its rich history. Lilith's breathing remained slow and shallow, until Madame Dupont disappeared up the stairs that lead to the boys dormitory when she exhaled a sigh of visible relief.

"I need to go," she said suddenly.

Arya cried out softly as Xavier cursed under his breath.

His mother admonished him. "Xavier! Language!"

"You're kidding, right?" He retorted. "You're leaving us because you're afraid of someone who just ignored your existence?"

Xavier stood up and Arya grabbed his hand, holding him near her as tightly as she could.

"Please don't go," Arya pleaded. "Stay, don't leave us with our father."

Lilith's face contorted before she sighed and nodded. "Okay, I'll stay."

"Don't do us any favors," Xavier said, yanking his hand from Arya's and walking up the stairs to his dorm.

"Xavier, wait," Lilith called, but he ignored her, just as Baan had done and disappeared out of sight. Sitting straighter and inhaling as deeply as she could, Lilith closed her eyes.

"Mom?" Arya's voice was filled with concern. "Are you okay? I don't know what to do to help. Or what to say to make you feel better?"

Her mother opened her eyes and smiled. "I'm fine, my sweet girl."

"I wish you'd told this to us when we had time to process. Xavier is still so mad and I am so out of my element here, Mom…" Pausing, Arya saw the look of anguish on her mother's face and she leaned in, kissing her cheek, "I love you, Mommy… it's okay. We're okay."

"I'm fine, my sweet girl, and, of course I love you too," her mother's feigned steadiness, standing up smoothly. "How about you show me that Pegasus? What's it's name?"

"Her name is Persephone and you are just going to love her!" Arya exclaimed, jumping up, leading the way to the stables.

"You know that was my name for a time?" Lilith replied, grinning at her daughter. "During the time of the Greek Gods!"

Surprise filled Arya's face and she giggled. "What? No way!" Her laugher was light and contagious, causing Lilith to join in. "One day you'll

have to tell us all about it!"

"But first, your pegasus!" Lilith replied, holding her hand up, pointing to the sky as if they were on a quest. Arya skipped alongside her mother as they headed toward the rear of the Academy, gushing about Persephone.

"She's the most magnificent thing in the world, Mom. So beautiful and, she's so gentle and graceful. It's so exhilarating! Riding her is the best feeling ever. You'll love her!"

★★★

Standing in the open door to his room, Xavier waited for Baan to leave whichever dorm room his kid was assigned so Xavier could talk to him. Over ten minutes passed, a feeling of awkwardness growing second by second, overwhelming Xavier into abandoning his post by the door. He moved to sit in the armchair on his side of the room, certain that he would see them leave. Another ten minutes passed before he finally heard Madame Dupont's voice in the hall.

"Master Adamson, your son will find a great home here at the Academy and he is far from the only wolf here, although he may replace our Head Wolf as the Campus Alpha," she said chuckling. "As is his right, of course."

"He has no interest in leading a pack," Baan replied easily. His accent was thick and clipped yet posh, with clear command of language. Xavier ran to his door just as Baan was passing by. "He'd much rather be excluded from the pack, if he's to have a choice. He is like me, a lone wolf, you see."

"I am sure we can arrange something for a wolf of such nobility." Madame Dupont nodded. "It would be my absolute-"

"Baan?" Xavier interrupted, standing in the threshold to his room, surprised by his own courage to call out. "Can we have a minute?" Baan cocked an eyebrow and nodded, looking at Madame Dupont.

"This is highly unusual, Master Morningstar. Perhaps you should wait until you're both in a common setting." Madame Dupont looked worried, not as oblivious to the undertones of tension that had been building up since Baan's arrival as Xavier thought.

"It's fine, Madame," Baan said smoothly, displaying his perfect white teeth in a grin. "We are brothers. What could be more common than that?"

Baan's eyes seemed to be infinitely deep, mesmerizing, even. Madame Dupont nodded as if she was dazed, bowed slightly and left the two standing in the hall as she headed down the stairs to the grand foyer, without another word. Xavier watched as she left his sight before fixing his gaze on his brother.

"Please come in," Xavier said, moving over so Baan could enter.

"I was wondering if you had it in you," Baan replied, sitting down in the armchair closest to Xavier's side of the room. Xavier sat down opposite his werewolf brother.

"What do you mean?" Xavier asked.

"To speak with me. I wondered if you would try, Lucifer's son."

"I really don't know what to say to you," Xavier began. "I mean, we're brothers, right? I figured I had to meet you…"

"Your youth is showing," Baan said, disdainfully.

"Right…" Xavier paused. "Well, I am sixteen." Baan let out a snicker and allowed a small smile to rest on his face. Xavier thought he looked almost friendly. "I only know what our mom told me about you and…"

"You want to know if I am a danger to you or your twin?" Baan leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and holding his chin with his hands.

"And our mother," Xavier added. Baan's eyes changed from deep brown human to golden wolf with a growl of anger.

"She is not a topic here, Boy," Baan warned, his voice gravelly. Xavier sat back, putting both his hands up.

"Sorry, but fine. Are you going to hurt Arya?" He asked. "Or me?"

Baan leaned back, staring Xavier up and down, taking his measure. "If I was a danger, telling you no would make no difference," he replied. "I would simply lie and do as I wish, Boy. And you couldn't stop me."

"So you are?" Xavier asked again.

"I did not say that, boy."

"I'm not your boy," he muttered bitterly.

Baan let out a deep, guttural chuckle. "No, that is true."

Xavier was confused and annoyed. He sighed in frustration. "You're not actually saying anything." Baan leaned back, tapping the arm of the chair in a rhythmic pattern. "Are you or are you not going to hurt me or my sister?"

“You will become more of a danger to all of us than I could ever be to you,” Baan finally said. “The Heirs of Hell, as you are after all.”

“Being the Heirs of Hell doesn’t make us dangerous.” Xavier couldn’t believe this guy wouldn’t answer a simple question.

“Have you never heard the prophecy? Do you even know what you will become? Your power? Your destiny? Do you, Boy?” Baan laughed bitterly. “No, just an ignorant, arrogant child.”

“I do know what I am, wolf boy. I am the prince of Hell and I’m an arcane void, according to…” his voice trailed off before he mentioned their mother.

Baan’s eyes shifted into their golden wolf form at the insult before quickly reverting to their natural human state. “But not the prophecy?”

Xavier shook his head and shrugged. He was irritated and confused. He’d never even heard of a prophecy having to do with him.

“And your sister?” Baan asked. “What is she? Does she know?”

“No idea,” Xavier replied. “She’s powerful though.”

Just then Theo came into the room, laughing with a boy, his arm wrapped around the boy’s back. Seeing Xavier with Baan, he froze.

“Sorry, sorry! I thought you were with your mom and sister,” Theo apologized, turning red, pushing his friend out the door before Xavier could see who it was. “I’ll leave you alone.”

Theo fled the room without looking back. Xavier made a mental note to talk to Theo later before returning his attention to Baan.

“Your sister?” Baan repeated.

“I said I don’t know… She’s powerful, whatever she is. Great at spell-casting.” Xavier said, mildly annoyed. “What prophecy?”

“Your mother should tell you…” Baan’s voice trailed off. He seemed lost in thought. “Powerful… Perhaps powerful enough to break a blood curse,” Baan said, nearly inaudibly. He looked pensive for a moment before he seeming to decide something.

“Oh come on!” Xavier protested but Baan ignored him, standing and fixing his jacket, buttoning it.

Baan headed to the door.“Tell our mother and sister that I will be joining them for dinner with my son.”

“Our father is here too,” Xavier warned, standing up so he didn’t have to crane his neck to look at his brother. “Lucifer, I mean. My father… and

Arya's… you know."

"I see. Very well," Baan strode quickly from the room, leaving Xavier alone.

"I guess we're having a family reunion," Xavier said to the empty room, feeling more confused than ever.

★★★

Arya and Lilith were cooling down their horses as Xavier came out to meet them. Arya's Pegasus had her face in a bucket of grains. In the next stall, a stunning pale blue unicorn was currently enjoying the brushing Lilith was giving her, nudging Lilith with her head sweetly. Xavier slowed his pace when they came into view. They were both dressed in matching black riding pants and white button up shirts with boots. From behind Xavier could barely tell them apart, although Lilith was a few inches taller than Arya. He could hear Arya's laugh, as pure and real as ever. His mother turned to see him and her smile made his heart burst with love for her.

Xavier loved his mother deeply, which is why he'd been so angry with her. Growing up without a father, his mother had made sure he had plenty of male role models, from Chewy at the diner to Tyrone Hernandez, one of the best surgeons in the world. She always told him they were special and that they were going to be amazing, but then she lied about who and what they were his entire life. He didn't really know how to process that. Watching her at the door to the barn, he sighed, missing his mother more in that moment than he had in weeks. Arya finally glanced over and saw him, waving him over. Reluctantly, he went to them.

"Xavy, we just had the best ride and guess what?" Arya teased. Her face was flushed and reddened by the sun but she looked so blissfully happy.

Xavier grinned, masking his own inner dilemma. "What's that, Ya?"

"Mom's afraid of hippogriffs too!" She squealed in delight as her mom tossed the horse brush at her.

"Oh come on, Mom! They're not that scary!" Xavier laughed, walking over to his personal favorite and stroking his beak. "Hello, Hornbeck. How are you today? See?" T

he Hippogriff seemed pleased with his attention, stretching out its oversized eagle neck to have its feathers ruffled.

“Thanks but no thanks,” Lilith replied, laughing. “Thank you, Master Bloodmaker, for allowing me to ride such a beautiful creature.”

Lilith scratched her mare behind the ear, calling out to the stable master who emerged from a stable midway through the barn.

Arryn bowed low. “It was an honor, my queen.”

Arya giggled as his cowboy hat fell from his head. Lilith gave her a chastising look and Arya muttered an apology, turning back to her Pegasus.

“My stables are yours.” Arryn stood relatively gracefully, kicking his hat up off the floor and into his hands. Putting it back on his head, he tipped it to Arya, who blushed, and winked. “Princess,” he said, disappearing into another stall further down.

“Nice boy,” Lilith whispered to her daughter, who flushed nearly as red as their hair.

Xavier snickered to himself, pretending to be focused on Hornbeck the Hippogriff. After a minute, he sighed. He gave the bird’s beak one last stroke before turning to his mother; his face serious.

“Mom, I talked to Baan,” he forced the words from his mind. “He says he will be at dinner… with his son.” Xavier studied his mother’s expression.

A smile flickered on her lips before she became serious and nodded. “Does he know Lucifer is here?” She sounded anxious. Xavier nodded. “And he’s still coming?” Surprise filled her voice before she smiled. “Perhaps he’s ready to forgive me.”

“Hopefully,” Arya said. “I mean, whatever happened between you was, like, forever ago…”

“Yes, but after the first thousand years,” Lilith sighed, “time doesn’t mean what it once did. It only slows down long enough to make memories. Old resentments linger long after the dead have turned to ash and dust.”

“That’s dark,” Xavier said sarcastically.

“Perhaps,” she replied. Lilith was the oldest creature alive and she was weary. “Immortality changes us. We are no longer simply human, we are more… and often, we are less.”

“Less?” Arya spoke up, exiting the stall where Persephone continued to eat grains.

“We forget the sanctity of life… we forget the value of time.”

“Oh.” They fell silent as they began the walk back to the Academy to change for dinner. After a few moments, Xavier started to laugh.

“Holy, Baan is intense,” he said, his voice filled with humor. “I asked him if he was here to hurt us and he was, like, all death stare before he was like ‘you’re the dangerous ones!’”

Lilith stopped about ten feet from the door to the Academy’s southeast side. “What else did he say?” She asked, obviously concerned.

“I don’t know. Something about a prophecy but he wouldn’t say what and, yea, he said we were the dangerous ones,” Xavier grabbed his sister from behind and picked her up. “Imagine this little monster terrifying a werewolf.” His sister squealed and they laughed together. Lilith eyes were filled with worry.

“Watch out, World!” Arya exclaimed, “Arya, Princess of Hell, is dangerous. Hi-ya!”

She did a karate chop for effect, joking with her brother. Xavier struck a pose next to her and Lilith finally laughed genuinely. These children were not the others, Lilith was sure of that. They were pure of the ancient rivalries, completely ignorant and in bliss. How long that would last, she wasn’t certain.

★★★

Madame Dupont was waiting for them when they returned to the Academy. She was holding three wardrobe bags, folded in half over her arms. Lucifer had insisted she bring them what he deemed appropriate clothing, despite Madame Dupont insisting the dinner was not a formal event. He had ignored her and commanded she do as instructed or risk her position at the Academy, which she was unwilling to do over something so insignificant. Although, she had long ago realized that the King was never refused, for if he was, he immediately took what was most beloved. For Madame Dupont, it was the Academy and her students that meant the world to her.

Arya was the first to enter, holding the door for her mother, her twin brother following behind. “That was so much fun, Mom! We should make a stable for Persephone to use at home so we can visit you!”

Seeing Madame Dupont standing in the corridor caused her to fall silent. Lilith bumped into Xavier, who'd stopped suddenly and peeked around him.

"Oh, Madame Dupont! How lovely to see you again. We were just riding on this glorious day the Goddess provided," Lilith said in what Arya was now considering her queen voice, well-spoken, lilting and filled with kindness.

"My queen." Madame Dupont bowed as gracefully as she could with the wardrobe bags in her arms She handed one to each of them. "His Majesty asked me to present you these gifts. He asks you wear them to dinner tonight."

"Oooooh, fancy," Arya said, unzipping her bag to reveal a shimmering emerald material. She pushed the material back in and closed the bag. "Mom, do you want to change in my room with me?"

Lilith nodded, not bothering to look at her dress. Xavier swung his over his shoulder and walked off, waving as he went.

"See you at dinner, Ma and Ya!" He called over his shoulder, disappearing out of sight.

"Let's go get ready," Arya said, taking her mother's arm.

Madame Dupont bowed again and Arya avoided eye contact. She was still wildly uncomfortable with the bowing, but even more so with Madame Dupont, who almost never bowed to the twins as she was their Headmistress.

"Thank you, Madame Dupont," Lilith said, taking her dress. "Please let His Majesty know we are grateful for his gifts."

Lilith lead the way to Arya's dorm room, leaving Madame Dupont behind them. Arya tried to lighten her mother's mood but could sense she was failing to ease her mother's tension. From the moment she was handed the dress, Arya knew Lilith was angry and worried, but she felt helpless to do anything.

"It'll be great tonight, Mom," Arya attempted to distract her mother. "Did you know the food magically appears on our tables and disappears at the same time? Xavy met the chef and says that it's the local pack's Beta. Anyways, he's such a good cook. He always makes just the right thing. I don't know how, but he seems to always know what we want."

"That is impressive," Lilith agreed, still in a worried daze.

Lucifer was parading them out, that was clear, but Arya was determined to enjoy it, no matter how strange it all felt. She was a Princess, after all, she reasoned. It was her birthright.

"I can't wait to dress up," Arya persisted. "I just wish Latoya was here to do my makeup."

Lilith's attention returned to her daughter and she smiled, wistfully. "Yes, that would be nice."

Twenty minutes flew by as the mother and daughter got ready for dinner. Arya's dress was a silky green A-line with just the right amount flare. It seemed to shimmer between emerald and forest green as she moved. Her hair contrasted brilliantly and she chose a red lipstick a few shades darker to compliment the look. Lilith was impressed with Lucifer's choice for their daughter. His choice for her, on the other hand, was far bolder. He'd selected a dark lavender empire-silhouette evening gown that complimented her skin tone perfectly. Arya was almost jealous of her mother's beautiful dress as Lilith looked devastatingly beautiful and positively ethereal, but she was too in awe of her mother to have envy in her heart.

After they were dressed and their shoes were on, Lilith helped Arya with her makeup, teaching her a spell that would give her just the desired outcome. Soon after, Amber knocked and entered the room.

"Holy Goddess!" She gasped, staring at her roommate. "You're so beautiful, Arya! My queen, you look like the Goddess incarnate."

"Thank you, Amber," she replied, smoothing her dress slightly. "I am sure that is exactly what His Majesty was hoping when he selected this dress." Turning to Arya, Lilith explained. "A show of family beauty is more impressive to Lucifer than a show of power."

"Why?" Arya asked. Lilith shrugged, her loose curls bouncing delicately on her shoulders.

"Lucifer is vain and greedy, lustful and angry, lazy and jealous. He was God's Favorite Son. When he fell from Grace, Lucifer did not regret his actions. Not at all. He has spent the last few hundred years competing with His God to become more powerful, more beloved, more feared. The thing about Lucifer is that he is not truly evil, but his apathy is almost worse."

"What do you mean?" Amber said, despite herself. Her eyes widened momentarily but Arya quickly calmed her with a smile.

“Lucifer thrives off of chaos and war in the mortal realm. While he often influences it, by sending his demons to infect mortals with … a sickness that corrupts them. Mortals call it possession. It feeds Lucifer, but he prefers natural human chaos. It gives him power when humans do acts of great violence against each other, but he doesn’t actually care about the innocent lives it costs.”

Lilith was staring at the clock while she spoke. It was nearly time to go down to dinner but she made no move for the door. “He’s not evil because he doesn’t care if his demons infect anyone at all. He can go years without a significant event and then a genocide will happen. He can thrive for decades after a mass shooting and lately,” she sighed sadly. “Lately there have been so many smaller, isolated incidents. Sometimes it’s his demons. I can smell them, but lately, the mortals are doing these violent acts to themselves.”

Arya was afraid to stop her mother, because it seemed as if she wasn’t even talking to the girls. Amber took Arya’s hand, clutching it tightly. They just stood there, silently, listening to the First Witch.

“This Academy is the most good he has ever done, either as an Archangel or the Devil,” she whispered. “This is a safe-haven from his demons, a place for my descendants, not just his. As if he wanted to give me something… pure.”

“Mom! Are you for real?” Arya scoffed, interrupting at last. “Do you honestly think this is just an overture to you? Some big romantic gesture?”

Arya wasn’t about to buy that story, she thought indignantly. There was no way her father did this for anything other than his own vanity, she was sure of it.

“You’re probably right.” Her mother’s flickering hope faded and her face turned to stone. Her mother moved towards the door, her hand hovering on the handle. “It’s time for dinner. A word of warning, Arya. Baan is nearly as old as I am and has had a grudge against me, but also Aya, for most of that time. You are our doppelgänger and he will likely treat you as he does us.”

She opened the door and left without another word, the door falling shut behind her, leaving Arya and Amber standing in stunned silence, still holding hands.

“I need to change,” Amber said after a few moments, letting Arya’s hand go. “We’ve been told it’s a formal evening.”

“Oh,” Arya said thinking. “Do you want to wear the dress I wore on my birthday? Oh gosh, it would look so pretty on you!” Arya rushed to her closet and pulled it out, handing it to Amber, who grinned.

“I love it!” She rushed into her bathroom, leaving the door cracked.

“Where are you sitting?” Arya called to Amber.

“With my mother and some other witches from our coven,” Amber replied.

“Darn,” Arya sighed. “I was hoping you’d sit with me… but I get it.” Amber opened the door and twirled around, the dress glitteringly beautifully. “You look amazing!”

Amber blushed and slipped on her shoes. Holding their dorm room door open, Amber waited for Arya to go through before following her out. “Go on, Princess. Your audience awaits.”

★★★

Xavier was dressed in a new midnight black tuxedo with a royal blue shirt to offset the darkness of the suit. His tie was black and he had solid black wingtips included in the bag. Lucifer definitely had style, Xavier had decided while dressing after his shower. When he came out of the bathroom, Theo seemed to drip with jealousy over the ensemble.

“You look amazing,” Theo said, astounded. “Like a movie star! No, wait, like James Bond!”

Xavier stood taller, grinning. He knew he looked awesome, but it always felt good to hear someone else say it. He winked at himself. “Thanks, man. I guess my old man knows fashion.”

“Yea, he definitely does… You nervous?” Theo asked. “I would be. I heard your dad talking to Madame Dupont earlier and he’s clearing the Teacher’s table and putting your family there. He’s basically making it a feast in honor of you all.”

Xavier groaned when he heard this but he’d suspected as much when Madame Dupont handed him the wardrobe. “That sounds like him.”

“He even changed the menu. I was helping Greywolf most of the afternoon, along with the Lastrange sisters and about half of the other kids without parents here.”

“You’re kidding,” Xavier snorted. “What an ass!”

“He’s the king,” Theo reminded him. “He can do whatever he wants. Besides, it will make the most interesting Parents’ Weekend we’ve ever had.”

“Oh, no! Just what I needed. A Royal Feast when I’d rather just have mac and cheese with my mom.” Xavier, moaned laughing at the same time. He looked at Theo’s regular uniform and walked to his closet. He pulled out the clothes he wore on his birthday, clean and pressed. “Want to dress up too?”

Theo grinned and grabbed the hanger, running into his bathroom to change. Moments later, he came out and spun around. “You’ve got decent style too, Xavier,” complimented Theo. “I look damn good.”

The boys chuckled and looked in the mirror together.

“Yea,” Xavier said seriously. “Maybe that guy you like will notice you lookin all that!”

Theo reddened and paled simultaneously. “H-h-how? How did you know?” Theo said shocked. He backed away from Xavier as if he was afraid Xavier might hurt him.

“Relax, Dude. I saw that guy earlier. I’ve seen you guys around campus, always alone together, talking, splitting up the minute anyone you know comes around… You don’t have to hide it from me. My best friend, Luke, he’s gay and his Dad is a pastor of his church.” He meant to show his support but Theo’s face twisted in confusion.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Pastor? What?”

Xavier remembered in that moment that Theo had been raised in the Shadow Realm and probably didn’t even know what church was, as religion was not taught at the Academy. “Oh, well, see churches are known for being anti-gay, but Luke’s Dad was cool about him coming out and being gay and whatever. And I never cared. I mean, I always kind of knew,” Xavier explained. “Besides, I would think here, it doesn’t matter. I mean, Amber’s gay. Claire and Meg too. Bethany…” Xavier stopped listing off the gay people he knew when he realized they were all girls.

“It’s different for guys,” Theo said, looking down at his feet. Theo sounded ashamed, which made Xavier angry. “In the Shadow Realm, women are meant to love women and men, both or either. It’s celebrated, even. But it’s still not common for a man to love another man… some people have trouble with the idea…”

“Screw anyone who has a problem with you, man.”

Theo nodded but didn’t look up. “Yea, I guess.”

“Look, I’m okay with it and I’ll throw my weight around as a prince if I have to!” He exclaimed. “You shouldn’t feel bad about wanting love someone just because they’re a dude too.”

Theo smiled faintly and nodded, still not meeting Xavier’s eyes. Xavier approached him slowly, putting a hand on each of Theo’s shoulders, waiting until Theo met his eyes before continuing.

“You are exactly who you’re meant to be, Theo. You’re an awesome person and my friend. I’m happy I know you.”

Theo teared up and hugged Xavier tightly.He pressed his face against Xavier and let out a half cry-laugh that was muffled against Xavier’s chest. “Thanks, man.” They stood like that for a minute or two before Theo pulled away, wiping his eyes and laughing. “Let’s go to dinner.”

★★★

As the bell tolled for dinner-hour, Arya descended the stairs with Amber at her side. She met her brother at the base of the stairs in the grand foyer. Xavier took Arya’s hand and twirled her around, spinning her dress so it billowed out, beautifully, shimmering every shade of deep, rich green imaginable.

“You look gorgeous, Ya,” he whistled. “You’re gonna make the whole school drool.” “Right back at you, Xavy!” she exclaimed, looking him up and down. “You look incredible. Like some Secret Agent.”

“That’s me,” he said, making finger pistols with his hands. “Bond, James Bond.” The twins laughed as they approached their Headmistress and the Head Sorcerer, who were waiting by the Hall’s door. He looked at them confused. “Sorry, we’re late…”

“We were just supposed to meet our parents,” Arya explained. “I took longer than my mom so she said she’d meet me down here.”

Amber snuck past the adults, opening the door softly and squeezing through the small opening she made before she shut it behind her without a sound.

“You’re not in trouble, Master Morningstar, Mistress Morningstar,” The Headmistress replied. “We are here to escort you to your places of

honor, in a few moments. The king and queen will arrive soon."

She was wearing a long black gown with her blonde hair pinned up and black lipstick. It was obvious she had realized the formality of the event, but the Head Sorcerer certainly did not understand.

As usual, Madoc Weatherly was a sight to behold. He was dressed in a blue and yellow striped sweater with blue sweatpants that seemed to match. He wore purple and red polka dotted socks with pink flip-flops. His beard was now a terrible yellowed green but he wasn't wearing his usual knit cap. Instead, he was wearing a bright baby blue fedora and a red feathered boa. Arya was delighted.

"You look incredible, Madoc," Arya complimented the Warlock, who grinned happily back at her.

"Thank you, my dear. You are a vision of the Goddess herself," he said, beaming.

"Madame Dupont, you look lovely as ever," Arya smiled sweetly at the Headmistress, who merely tipped her head in response.

Arya turned slightly, rolling her eyes at her brother, who was suppressing a laugh. Just then, Lilith entered from the corridor that lead to the Living History classroom, Lucifer following closely behind. She looked beautiful and sad, Arya thought, exactly like the Persephone of myth. She suddenly felt as though she understood her mother just a little more, knowing those small details.

"Children," Lucifer greeted them. He looked quite debonaire in his midnight black tuxedo with crimson shirt and tails. His wingtips were red on black, completing the look. "You look very appropriate."

"You look wonderful, Xavy." Lilith hugged her son, pulling back to look him up and down. "So handsome."

"Thanks, Mom," he grinned at her.

Xavier might share the look of his father, but there was an innocence to him that Lucifer could never emulate. Even his confidence was different. Where Lucifer was arrogant and selfish, Xavier was just confident and hopefully optimistic.

"Mom's right, Xavy," Arya teased. "You have never looked better."

Arya wondered how different she was from her mother, standing next to her in the finest clothing she'd ever worn. She wondered how different her mother was from the woman who birthed the supernatural.

“Oh whatever,” he popped his collar. “I always look good.” He burst out laughing within a heartbeat of his declaration.

Lucifer sighed, annoyed. “Madame Dupont, you and this… warlock…” Lucifer’s voice dripping with judgement and disdain, “may escort the prince and princess to their places and announce the queen and I.”

Madame Dupont dipped low in her dress, Madoc following her lead. They rose together and opened the Main Hall’s french doors, waiting for the twins to join.

“Go on,” Lilith said. “It’s time you were properly introduced to our society.” She pushed her children away as Arya and Xavier took each other’s hands and walked towards their Headmistress. Madame Dupont took Xavier’s arm and Madoc took Arya’s. With one last look at their mother, they went through the threshold.

As they walked into the Hall, Sabrina Michael’s voice called out, “Please stand for the royal family.” A soft roar from the shuffling of seats filled their ears as they entered the Hall. Pausing at the door, Madame Dupont nodded towards the witch, who was dressed in a lovely shade of burgundy.

“Prince of Hell, Xavier Morningstar,” Sabrina Michaels announced.

As she escorted him down the center of the room, he realized it had been transformed into exactly what he imagined a Throne room would look like. Two columns with multiple rows of tables were lined up and filled with families. In the middle was a deep crimson velvet rug that ran the length of the room to a table where Baan and his son sat at one end and Cliff and Zaya with Gwen at the other. In the middle were four seats, obviously meant for the royal family.

The Royal Table had a coat of arms with red and gold thread on black linen. In red, in the upper right and lower left of the crest, was a silhouette of the goat’s head that often represented Lucifer in ancient lore. In the opposite corners of the crest, in golden thread, the symbol of the spiral goddess, hands joined over her head. Her body curved with the triple spiral behind her figure. Xavier had to admit, he was really impressed.

A few moments later, Sabrina Michaels announced his sister, “Princess of Hell, Arya Morningstar.”

Xavier glanced behind him to see his sister fighting back tears and trying not to giggle at whatever Madoc was whispering in her ear. Her face

was flushed and she was biting her lip in an effort to stop herself, but he heard a giggle escape her every now and then.

Madoc had already become one of their favorite teachers in their time there, but Xavier knew Arya was also smitten with his eccentricities. He held his arm for Madame Dupont as they climbed the stairs to the platform, where the Royal Table stood, but she barely leaned on him. At last, Madame Dupont stopped at the seat next to Cliff, bowing and walking away, down to the closest empty seats to the Royal Table.

“Do not sit,” Zaya whispered to him, just as he was about to pull out his chair. She was wearing a lovely red, long sleeved dress that accented her natural pink undertones in her dark skin. Her hair was done in a spiraled bun on either side of her head, reminding Xavier of Princess Leia from Star Wars. “Wait for your father, the King.”

Xavier nodded in thanks to the Nephilim. “You look really good, Zaya."

She smiled, returning her attention to the youngest at the table. Baby Gwen was wearing a pink puffy dress that made Xavier think she was the most adorable marshmallow he’d ever seen. Zaya’d been much nicer to them since getting to know the twins from the time they spent with Gwen and had taken to helping them out when she saw an opportunity. Xavier had grown to trust her in their short time there.

“Your mother, she insisted all the family be here,” Zaya explained. “She said I am family too.”

Xavier grinned and agreed causing Zaya to tisk and turn away, hiding her flushed face. Patting Cliff’s shoulder, Xavier watched as his sister was delivered to a place next to Baan. He felt her fear and magic build as she stood staring ahead to where their mother was entering with their father. Cliff was wearing a black suit with a white shirt and red tie, his hair gelled down.

“The Academy of the Night has the great privilege and honor of welcoming their Royal Majesties, Lucifer Morningstar, King of Hell and his Queen, Lilith, the First Witch!” Sabrina’s voice carried through the room and every soul in the room was silent, bowing as the Royal Couple glided down the aisle.

Walking slowly to soak up every moment of their submission, Lucifer was clearly enjoying himself, preening like a peacock, while Lilith looked

at her children and focused on them, ignoring all the people around them. As they passed by, those behind them stood and began to applaud. Xavier cocked his eyebrow at Arya, who still wouldn't look at him, or at the brother sitting next to her. Xavier was worried but there wasn't much he could do. Sighing, he shifted and looked out at the crowd that watched his family with such intensity, nervousness fluttering in his stomach.

Finally, the king and queen made it to their thrones, and sat, waving their hands to allow the rest of the room to resume their seats. Xavier sighed with relief when he was allowed to sit at last.

Lucifer smiled magnificently at the crowd. "Welcome to the Academy of Night! I am pleased to welcome you to the first royal family dinner. Please, take your seats and fill your cups." Lucifer turned to Lilith and smiled charmingly at her. Her face flushed in response. Arya exchanged a look with Xavier of surprise. They'd never seen their mother blush. "Drink and dine with your royal family."

"May the Goddess bless us all," Lilith said, raising her glass to Lucifer. The room raised their glasses to the King.

"Dear sister," Baan said, startling Arya, pulling her chair out fo her. "Allow me to assist you." She nodded in thanks and reached for her mother's hand under the table, squeezing it tightly. Baan had turned to his son and was speaking quietly, all but ignoring Arya, which she was relieved for. She hadn't expected to be on display when she met him for the first time. Xavier could feel her tension and magic like static in the air but didn't know how to calm her from there.

A few moments later, the feast appeared on every table, except the Royal Table, whose plates were filled with a small portion of everything offered. Arya took a small bite of something she didn't recognize, a small rice dish that smelled of curry. She moaned in delight and took another bite. She tried a red and orange diced dish that tasted like mango and she was thrilled, losing herself in her plate.

"Hello, my dear sister," Baan said, breaking her food focus. His voice was deep and rich with a slightly accent that indicated he lived somewhere on the other side of the world. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

Arya swallowed and took a steadying breath, turning to him with a sweet smile. "It's very nice to meet you, Baan," she said, her voice soft.

Despite her nerves, she spoke as if she was calm, which made her smile grow.

Baan nodded. “This is my son, Lucien, your nephew, I suppose. Lucien, this is your aunt Arya. Not to be confused with the Vampire Leech Aya, although they look remarkably alike.”

The last sentence was spoken with distinct disgust. “I’ve heard you look exactly like your father, Adam,” Arya replied, maintaining her calm. Baan said nothing. “Xavier definitely takes after my father,” she continued. “I understand why Aya and I must look so much alike, since we are both Lilith’s daughters.”

“You are bold, Dear Sweet Arya,” Baan whispered, his voice grave. “I hope not too bold?”

“I really don’t know what you mean,” Arya said, shaking her head as curls flowed freely down her back, tickling her spine, forcing her to fight back chills. “It’s nice to meet you, Lucien. Welcome to the Academy! I haven’t been here long, but I do enjoy it. I suppose you’re a wolf? I have a good friend that will be able to show you around, if you like.”

“That’d be great. Thanks,” Lucien had no accent Arya could detect, which she decided meant he was from the northern US.

“Where are you from?” she asked politely. “I grew up in Peak’s Village, Colorado. Right near the Springs area.”

Just as Lucien was about to answer, Baan interrupted. “That’s no concern of yours, Princess.”

Arya scoffed and looked away, shaking her head. She was fighting the urge to tell her new brother off already.

“I think she was just making conversation, Father,” Lucien said, causing Arya to turn back, nodding. “It’s what we young people do when we meet each other.”

Baan side-eyed his son but said nothing.

“Arya, eat, Darling,” Lilith said from her other side. “Your dinner is getting cold. You can speak after we finish.”

At her behest, Arya took a bite of what looked like turkey which greeted her to the flavors of a deep fried buttery deliciousness that caused her to moan aloud as she returned to the task of clearing her plate.

“Oh my gosh! That’s so darn good!” Arya said, taking another bite and another, finishing her portion of turkey in three bites. She tried the potatoes

next, which were phenomenal. “What is that? Truffle oil?” She scooped more into her mouth, savoring every bite.

Lucifer ate in silence, not smiling but not frowning or glaring at anyone, which Xavier supposed was an improvement. His face seemed completely neutral as he tasted the menu he compiled for the chefs to make. Next to him, Xavier was fighting to keep from making similar noises to his sister. They’d become foodies in the last three years, when they’d been allowed to stay home alone and cook their own meals. They were deeply enjoying this feast, as it fulfilled nearly all their fantasies.

Lucifer sighed heavily and put down his fork, tines down, crossing his knife over it, signaling he was done with his supper. Suddenly, every plate and morsel of food vanished to the surprise and protest of those who had yet to finish their meals. Standing, Lucifer raised a glass of red wine and turned to Lilith.

“All rise!” Sabrina called out from her spot, scrambling to her feet.

“My queen! My love! My wife! To your beauty and immorality!”

Lilith raised her glass in return, taking a sip.

“To the queen!” The room said together, raising their glasses to Lilith.

“To my daughter, the Princess, her youth and beauty!”

Arya picked up her glass and raised it to her father, sipping the red liquid, realizing she too had wine.

“To the princess!” the room said.

“To my son, the Prince, to his talents and strength.”

Xavier raised his goblet and took a big gulp of wine.

“To the Prince!” the room cheered.

Lilith stood with her glass raised to Lucifer. “And to our king, our leader, our guide.”

“To the king!” The room said in unison.

By the time they were done toasting, Arya felt a little tipsy, relaxing a little, her magic receding. Arya and Xavier glanced at each other a few times during the toasts but soon after, Xavier begged permission to join his friends, a group of boys that had taken to hanging around Theo and Xavier’s room. Arya didn’t know them very well as she spent most of her time with Amber and the other girls. Lucifer granted Xavier his request and allowed him to leave the Royal Table, warning Xavier that he was still

being watched. Arya sighed and Lilith glanced over, offering a consoling smile.

"You're doing wonderfully, sweet girl," her mother whispered, rubbing Arya's knee under the table. Arya fought the urge to lean into her mother, shifting uncomfortably in her seat, her dress slipping and sliding on the chair, causing her to balance precariously since her feet didn't reach the floor, which she was thankful for the overly long tablecloth blocking the view to their laps and feet.

"Thanks, Mom," Arya whispered back. "This is so weird." Lilith smiled, nodding.

"You get used to it. Surprisingly fast," her mother replied, softly. They were watching the crowds break into different groups, socializing amongst themselves. Parents who knew each other were catching up, while others were meeting for the first time.

"Mother," Baan said from next to Arya. "May I take my sweet sister for a walk in the gardens here? My son, Lucien, would love to get to know his Grandmother." Lilith's breath shallowed but no other sign showed her nerves. She nodded and smiled at Lucien.

"It would be a gift to know your son, Baan," Lilith's voice was regal but cheerful. "Come sit, Lucien. Have a wonderful walk, Darlings."

Arya looked into her mother's eyes and saw a glimmer of hope and knew she had to go with her brother, despite every instinct telling her to stay inside. Her eyes darted to Amber, who had been watching her from her spot in the distance. Amber stood up and began to walk towards them at a quick pace. In this moment, Arya was beyond grateful for her new best friend.

"I would love to join you, Baan, but I hope you don't mind if we bring Amber along? We always go for a walk after dinner before curfew and she's afraid to go alone," Amber nodded, smiling as she walked up.

"We go to a magic school, Princess! There are things haunting us here! I just know it!" Amber said, pretending to sound afraid. Baan nodded, seriously, bowing slightly to Amber.

"I would never ask a young lady to walk alone in a place like this," Baan replied, nonchalantly. "But allow me a moment. An Alpha must pay his respects to his Liege."

Baan walked to the center of the table, in front of Lucifer and just before Arya thought he was going to turn, Nathaniel Timberson's father, Zachariah, was bending the knee to Baan, in front of the entire school and all of the parents. Soon, every wolf in the room, from old to young, were down on one knee, their heads bent in respect to Baan, the First Wolf.

Lucifer's eyes glowed red in anger but he said nothing and his face remained its neutral calm. Baan motioned for the Alpha to rise, which created a wave of wolves rising and retaking their seats. Arya was impressed by the display and although she wasn't sure what just happened, she could tell that Lucifer was enraged by the act. Baan returned to where the girls were standing and smiled.

"Shall we?" Baan waved toward the open Hall doors.

Arya took Amber's hand and the girls followed Baan through the grand foyer and into the gardens out the eastern doors. Arya breathed deeply through her nose as they stepped outside. She closed her eyes and allowed her senses to fill with the glorious scents of Jasmine and Lilac that hung in the moist, cool air.

The moon shone brightly in the sky, just a few days from its apex. The sky above them looked like a backlit canopy with holes punched in it, sparkling and twinkling with spectacular dancing Northern Lights completing the magnificence of the garden. The cobblestone path led the trio further from the school, fireflies dancing in the flowers, which seemed vibrant even in the dim light of the moon.

"So…" Arya said, awkwardly at last. "I guess we're brother and sister.… a couple centuries or you know, forever, removed."

Amber walked ahead of Arya a few steps to give the siblings some privacy.

"Half. You are my half sister," he replied. The distinction seemed important to him. "I am Adam's son, the First Man." Arya's mind raced as she thought of something to say.

"Did you ever meet your father?" Arya said, stopping along the path to smell a white rose bush.

Baan's eyes narrowed. "Why do you want to know? Did mother ask you?"

"What? Oh, no! You just mentioned he was your father, which I mean, I already knew that… but I just met mine and was wondering if it was this

hard for you," Arya said, defending herself without anger.

Baan's eyes widened in surprise. He nodded, understandingly. "Yes, I met Adam. Once" Baan replied. "He was angry to discover Lilith had been with child when she abandoned him." Baan's voice sounded resentful and Arya wondered if he believed that.

"That's not what happened!" Arya tried to fight for her mother but Baan ignored her.

"I would know more than you, Dear Sweet Sister." He continued to walk down the path, stopping under a large lilac tree and smelling some of the purple flowers. "You see, she kept my sister and I a secret from him and then, with the help of the Goddess, she abandoned the Garden, where I should have grown up, among the Godly creatures that filled it and the God's Love, as it was meant to be…"

"What was he like?" Arya hoped she didn't sound as afraid as she felt, but she could feel his rage rippling off him in waves. It terrified her to discover what happened if that rage became a tsunami. "I mean, obviously, you look alike. I've realized that about us. We are replicas of our parents." She picked a red rose off one of the many rose bushes as she passed, following Baan a few steps behind him.

Baan's anger receded somewhat and he smirked. "Yes, I am Adam's son and as such, I do look very much like him," he paused. "I am taller." Arya let out a giggle and Baan joined her laughing deeply. "He was not welcoming to his firstborn son."

"Maybe he didn't know how to be a father?" Arya suggested, smelling the rose in her hand.

"He was a hateful man. Called me a demon, said our mother was a demoness."

"Obviously he was crazy," Arya said, hoping her goosebumps were from the cold.

"I think that perhaps he was right. After all, I did become a Beast in the end." Arya gulped audibly and Baan's eyebrow rose in judgement. "Afraid of the beast in me, dear sister?"

Arya's breath became ragged, shaking her head. "Of course not," she laughed nervously.

Amber walked too far ahead in an attempt to give them space. Arya didn't bother to call out to her as the hair on the back of her neck stood.

Baan smiled menacingly, his eyes transformed into a wolf's.

"You should be." And in a flash, he was on her, hitting her in the head with something hard in his hand she never saw. As she blacked out, she saw Amber running towards them. She tried to cry out as everything faded away.

★★★

Xavier began to anxiously pace near the table where Theo and their friends sat. He could feel something wasn't right but he didn't understand, his apprehension growing. Over fifteen minutes went by before Theo finally got up from the table and approached him, placing his hand on the taller boy's shoulder.

Theo couldn't handle the incessant pacing any longer. "Dude, what's going on?"

"I don't know," Xavier replied, his voice filled with tension. "I need to go talk to my mom. Can you come with me?" Theo nodded, hurrying after Xavier as he quickly strode through the Hall on his long legs. Bowing right before he got to the Royal Table, Theo caught King Lucifer's loathing gaze, and his eyes shifted away, ashamed.

"Prince, you must also bow before approaching the king or queen," Lucifer announced loudly. "Show your respect."

Xavier growled but bowed.

"Very good. You may rise. Your manservant should have gone over Royal Protocol with you. It is his sole purpose, after all." The Hall had fallen silent to watch the Prince get scolded but now they shifted nervously as Theo, a beloved fellow student, was demeaned in front of them all.

"No, it really isn't, remember? They're freed." Xavier had no patience for this man, King or father.

"You should still know your place, Prince," Lucifer said rising, his eyes flashing red with anger. "I am the King and you will treat me with respect or I will throw you out."

"My bad, okay?" Xavier said louder. "Mom? I need to talk to you." Xavier looked past Lucifer to his mother, who was watching the scene unfold in front of her, half risen out of her seat.

“Of course,” she said, standing completely, briskly walking past Lucifer to where her son was standing. “Lucifer, he’s a child still. You must forgive him and understand he means no harm.”

“Very well. Forgiven,” Lucifer said, retaking his seat, his eyes returning to their natural deep brown.

She touched Theo’s shoulder, allowing him to stand at last and he followed Xavier and the queen down the Hall, avoiding eye contact with everyone he knew.

“Come! Let us talk in the gardens,” Lilith said, leading the boys into the grand foyer. When they were safely away from the eyes of, well, everyone else, Lilith turned to her son, grabbing his arm gently. “What is it, Xavy?”

“Something’s wrong and I don’t know what it is. I feel… empty somehow. Like something is missing,” he replied, confused and upset. He crossed his arms and hugged himself.

“He’s been pacing for the last half hour or so,” Theo added. “Something’s wrong.”

Lilith inhaled deeply. Her heart filled with dread and she ran, holding her dress up as high as she could, out the door that lead to the East Gardens. The boys chased after her, both surprised at her speed in high heels on cobblestone.

“Arya!” She screamed out. Running down the path that lead away from the Academy, deep into the gardens, she screamed as she spotted Amber, laying on the ground in a heap, blood pouring from her head and arms

“Oh my Goddess,” Lilith cried out, rushing to the girl’s side. Amber moaned, alive but unconscious. “Xavier, come here, quickly!”

Her son squatted down next to his mother. “What do I do?”

“You need to heal her! Now! Before she dies!”

“I can’t!” Xavier protested. “I don’t know how!”

“Just focus, Xavy. Focus on love! Focus on happiness. On hope… On healing… Feel it pour out of your hands and into her body. Do you feel it?”

Xavier had placed his hands on Amber’s upper sternum and closed his eyes, listening to his mother’s advice and focusing on the love he felt for his mother, for Arya, for his friends and channeling it into his hands. Coughing, Amber opened her eyes and stared up at Xavier.

“Thank you,” she whispered, closing her eyes again, nearly slipping into an unconsciousness again.

“Wake up, Amber!” Lilith shook the girl. “Where is Arya? Where is my daughter?”

Amber struggled to open her eyes and looked at the Queen with shame. “Baan,” she said. “He took her,” she gasped before closing her eyes once more, drifting into unconsciousness.

★★★

Arya’s head ached too much to open her eyes. She couldn’t remember what had happened but she knew something wasn’t right. She wasn’t in her bed, the smell of the sheets was too different, but she also wasn’t in a hospital bed, where she ought to be if she had fallen and gotten hurt. She moaned as she moved slightly, her ears ringing and head pulsing in agony.

“Good. You’re awake.” Baan’s voice pierced her mind, causing her to cry out. He laughed coldly. “Sorry, Dear Sister, but you’re a powerful little abomination from what I’ve been told. I had to take… precautions and had my personal coven create this containment. Just for you.”

Arya opened her eyes, squinting to avoid the pain that was beating her.

“They added a bit more iron than necessary, I think… quite unfortunate for you. Even if you are a witch, you’re still a Nephilim.”

Arya’s mind flashed to a lesson about supernatural weaknesses. Iron was the Nephilim’s fatal weakness. Even slight exposure could cause extreme pain, which Arya now knew to be true as her head pounded unforgivingly.

“Please let me go,” she gasped in pain. She was surprised her voice sounded as strong as it did, when she felt weaker than she’d ever felt. She could barely move her head to look at her captor, her brother. “I haven’t done anything wrong. Please! Please! Just let me go!” She groaned.

“I cannot, dear sister… You see, I’ve been waiting for this.” Just then the room began to fill with young women, all with Baan’s dark skin and almond eyes, of different sizes and shapes, some with natural afros and some with plaits and others with flattened, straight hair. “Daughters, the doppelgänger of Aya and Lilith.” Baan’s smile was filled with

maliciousness. “You did a very good job on the containment,” he said to the witch who approached his right hand side. “Very well done, Surya.”

“Thank you, Father,” she said, preening with pride. “She doesn’t seem so strong.”

“Don’t let this fool you, dear daughter. She is more powerful than you could understand,” Baan warned. “She is my mother’s nephilim daughter. There may be no limit to what she can do. Take no chances.”

“Please let me go,” Arya pleaded again.

Baan ignored her and walked around her containment, forcing Arya to move if she wanted to keep him in her sights. “Oh do give it a rest, Little Arya. I’d like to make introductions… these beautiful witches are my daughters. A coven of the thirteen most powerful daughters I have… I’m sure you know that all wolves descend from my line but did you know only my sons become wolves?”

Arya shook her head and moaned in pain. “But there are girl wolves?” She was confused and suffering and she didn’t understand.

Baan laughed coldly. “Yes, that’s true, but my daughters are all witches, like their grandmother… like you. They don’t suffer from the curse that bound me to the moon. And they are here to help me undo that curse…”

Baan leaned close to Arya, unaffected by the magical prison. “And your blood, your body, is key.” Arya groaned in pain as he patted her cheek. “Get comfortable, Dear Sister. You will be here for a while.” He stood up and left the room.

The girl named Surya smiled at Arya, sympathy filling her almond eyes. “I’m sorry for what is happening to you.” Surya crouched next to the mattress Arya was bonded to, her long braids falling forward, lightly dancing on Arya’s arm. “I know this must hurt and you are a fellow witch… but my father needs this.”

Plucking a small clump of Arya’s hair out of her scalp, Arya cried out. Standing, Surya turned to her sisters.

“It’s time to begin.”

The girls formed a circle around the suffering small frame of a terrified girl, each taking a strand of her hair in their hands as they began to chant. Arya’s mind clouded in pain, blacking out within moments.

Chapter Eleven

Arya woke in anguish to a pitch black room that seemed entirely void of all sound and air flow. The blood rushing through her body pounded in her ears. Her breathing was ragged and shallow, her chest and throat sore from screaming. She was completely terrified, fear spreading through her like cold in her veins but her magic wasn't threatening to explode out of her. In fact, she couldn't feel her magic at all.

She let out a strangled cry which was lost to the room around her, muted almost as soon as it escaped her lips. She crawled off the mattress and felt her way to a wall. Using it to stand, she walked all the way around the room in darkness, feeling the walls several times over, before collapsing in a corner. Realizing there was no door, she cried out again. The sound was lost. There she was trapped with no access to magic, and deprived of all her senses, she had never been more afraid.

She had no idea how much time had passed before she drifted into a troubled sleep and woke to the same darkness again. The cycle repeated as her stomach ached from hunger. She tried pounding at all the walls to be released but had only worn herself out. She tried to connect to her familiar but felt the tether that connected them was gone too. Arya even tried to reach out to her twin through their imaginary twin connection they joked about, but she felt nothing, hollowed somehow as if he was disconnected

from her. The cycle of sleeping and waking to hungry desperation to falling asleep, crying continued.

Finally, she woke to bright lights blinding her and so much sound she felt she might go deaf from the volume. As she came back to her senses, she realized it was Baan's coven chanting over her again. She could barely understand their words but she could feel her own magic again, the tether to her familiar restored and so she focused on calling her familiar to her, while the witches chanted in ritual. Eventually she gave up, her weakness from starving over days wearing on her. Her magic didn't even seem capable of lighting a candle and her captivity was breaking her down.

Eventually, the chanting stopped and the witches left her, returning her prison to the sensory deprivation torture chamber. Sometime later, hours or days, she wasn't sure, the witch called Surya returned alone, glowing in the darkness, carrying a plate of food and a metal bottle with something sloshing inside.

"You must be hungry," she said, kindly. "I'm sorry this is happening to you, but you should eat." Arya couldn't speak, her throat and mouth were parched and her lips were cracked. "Here. It's hibiscus tea with honey."

Arya took a small sip and the sweet flavor hit her tongue causing her to chug half the bottle without thinking.

"Easy, I don't know when I'll be able to come back with more."

"Why are you doing this?" Arya finally found her voice.

"My father wants his vengeance," she replied sadly. "He has been waiting since the beginning of time to get it…" Her voice trailed off and she shook her head. "Just eat. It's good, I promise. Jambalaya. My mother's recipe."

"No… I mean… why are you being nice to me?" Arya asked.

"You don't remember me?" Surya replied. "We spent a summer together when we were nine…"

Arya tried to remember this strange girl but failed. "How?" Arya whispered, taking a spoonful of the delicious Cajun food.

"You know my uncle and cousin," Surya confessed. "Latoya? She's my little cousin, through my mother, not my father."

"Latoya? Latoya Hernandez? My best friend?" Arya gasped. "Does she know I'm here?"

“She has no idea, I swear. She just ascended herself.” Surya shook her head, defending her cousin.

“So she doesn’t know about me or Xavier?” Arya asked.

Surya shrugged her shoulders. “I doubt it. She was raised mortal.”

“Yea, so was I.” Arya finished the bowl of jambalaya, using her finger to get every last morsel. “That was really good. Thank you.” Surya nodded in the faint light of the candle. “How long will I be here?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, shaking her head, her braids swaying, the colorful beads clinking softly. “I think until he finds Aya.”

“The vampire queen?” Surya nodded. “Why? What do I have to do with that?”

“You’re a doppelgänger. Like he is with Adam. Like Aya is with Lilith. Your blood holds the key.”

“ I don’t understand. What does that mean. Why is he using me to get to her?”

“Because anything truly immortal has a doppelgänger,” Surya explained. “Or more than one, as in Lilith’s case, something that can be killed…”

“How can we be doppelgängers even though we’re three different species? Is that even possible that we are her doppelgängers? I am shorter than my mom and my hair is slightly darker than hers.”

“And that’s the issue,” Surya explained. “Because you are not a true doppelgänger, we are modifying our spells. It should work soon and then you’ll be returned to where you were taken from.”

“You don’t believe that…”

“Yes I do. Father has said so,” Surya protested. She picked up the empty bowl and stared at it in her lap.

“Do you honestly believe Baan’s just going to let me go?” Arya said in disbelief.

Surya didn’t look certain and simply shrugged. “I’ll do my best to help you, if he doesn’t,” she said, standing up. “Finish that,” she motioned to the bottle of tea.

Arya chugged the rest. Her hunger and thirst satisfied for the moment.

“Thank you. For this,” Arya said, motioning to the bowl. “I felt like I was dying… how long have I been here? Just tell me that?” She scrambled to her knees, putting her hands together, pleading.

Surya sighed and looked away, muttering something under her breath and a door appeared before she turned back to Arya, guilt in her dark eyes. “It’s been three days.”

As she left the room, the door disappeared, leaving Arya alone in the dark soundless, solitude once more. Her body filled with food and drink, she laid down on the mattress, falling asleep within minutes.

★★★

A week had gone by and there was no sign of Arya, magical or otherwise. The Academy had been turned upside down. Lucifer had taken control of the Academy until his daughter was found. Lilith had stayed just long enough after Arya’s abduction to caution Xavier against trusting anyone. Then she left leaving Xavier and the Academy by midnight the same night Baan had kidnapped Arya in search of them on her own.

Lucifer put the school on lockdown immediately, expelling the parents. Some took their children home with them as if they could smell the danger in the air. Those that remained closed ranks amongst their own kind. The wolves, who’d all shown their allegiance to Baan as their alpha in front of Lucifer, refused to participate in any activities with the witches and warlocks. Yet it was the immortals who were the most afraid, unsure where their loyalties should align.

With the school in such turmoil, classes were mostly canceled, save for Supernatural Creature Studies and private tutoring sessions. Madoc Weatherly continued to work with Xavier on a daily basis. Xavier was hoping to hone his magic enough to help find his twin. Xavier practiced his Astral Projection as much as he could after Madoc told him it could bring him to his twin, no matter where she was, but he hadn’t had much luck.

Sabrina Michaels was giving him extra tutelage too. She helped him with his spell casting. She warned Xavier he needed to prepare for anything. When he’d lost his temper and demanded to know why she hadn’t found Arya, Sabrina had calmly explained that Arya was under a cloaking spell that seemed unrelenting. They couldn’t track her magic or her Nephilim nature.

Sabrina explained to Xavier she even convened the Coven of Advanced Spell Casters and they had been searching for Arya, day and

night, hoping for a break in the cloaking spell. Xavier suggested they search for Baan but Lucien had disappeared with Baan, cleaning up all trace of them. Not even a stray hair was left behind, leaving a cold trail for they couldn't follow.

Amber woke up from the attack after two days, filled with shame. She blamed herself for not protecting Arya, begging Xavier for forgiveness. He'd just shrugged and walked away. He wasn't mad at Amber, but he wasn't interested in listening to her apologize over and over. Bethany used that as an excuse to growl at him every time they passed in the halls.

Lucifer, on the other hand, decided punishment was deserved. Four days after Arya went missing, Lucifer himself whipped Amber for her failure in front of the entire school twenty-five times, causing blood to pour from her body. Finally he sent her back to the hospital wing, where she stayed, to heal both her body and her mind. Xavier tried to visit her once after the public lashing but she'd refused to see anyone, except Bethany.

The Lastrange sisters took Xavier's side, claiming all witches must band with him. Nathaniel Timberson publicly broke up with Clarissa, who in turn hexed him with an aversion to his favorite food out of sheer pettiness. Theo was stressing about everything, but maintained loyalties with Xavier, for obvious reasons. Shuri and Jimmy both seemed anxious to maintain a civility with the species. Meg was openly hostile to the wolves now, aligning herself with Claire Lastrange. Leloni and Baku had also chosen to remain as neutral as possible. Their once strong friend group was now fractured and Xavier was sure it was only going to get worse the longer Arya remained missing.

The Saturday morning after Arya disappeared, Xavier decided to go down to the stables and see her pegasus. Within moments of entering, he could sense something had changed from the normal energetic atmosphere. The unicorns seemed nervous and his favorite hippogriff looked like it wanted to bite anything that came near it. Xavier walked by, straight to Persephone's stall. Arryn Bloodmaker was sitting on a small stool next to her, brushing her coat out and patting her wings gently.

"How's she doing?" Xavier finally said after a few moments. Arryn jumped slightly, turning towards Xavier in the same motion.

"She needs your sister to come home," Arryn said, matter of factly.

In his short time at the Academy, Xavier understood that Arryn was impatient, tiresome and often very callous with anything on two legs, but give him a supernatural creature and he seemed finely tuned to care for them, offering them love and kindness, patience and safety. Xavier nodded and scratched Persephone's head.

"I need her to come home too, girl," he told the pegasus. "I'm working on it."

"Maybe she can help," suggested Arryn. "No one has tried to ask her for help yet."

"Help? How?" Xavier replied confused.

"She's Arya's familiar," Arryn said as if Xavier was an idiot. "Ask her to find Arya."

Xavier sighed in frustration. "Okay, but how?"

Arryn tisked at Xavier and stood up from his stool, gathering the pegasus's lead and opening the stall, forcing Xavier to back away to allow them out.

"I'm all new to this, man. It's only been three weeks here and everyone expects me to know what I'm supposed to do."

"Right…" Arryn thought for a moment and turned to Xavier after patting the pegasus's neck. "Okay, Master Morningstar, you need a quick lesson in familiars."

"Okay?" Xavier replied hesitantly.

"Familiars are linked to their Witch or Warlock, much the way you and your twin are linked, I suspect. This tether is a connection that cannot be broken. It can be obscured, though, preventing the Familiar from finding her Witch. You, being Arya's twin, should be close enough to use your sibling bond to connect with her familiar."

"Okay… So how? How do I connect with Persephone?" Xavier asked, mildly confused by the concept, although it made some sort of sense, he supposed.

Arryn sighed, obviously masking frustration. "First you introduce yourself. Let her smell you. Talk to her so she can hear your voice. Then you climb on her back and ask her to bring you to Arya, tell her to find her. And feel your sister in your heart, feel her and the love you have for her as you do. It'll help Persephone here to want to help you."

"That's it?"

Arryn handed the lead to Xavier and motioned him out of the stables into the field. “Go on. My unicorns need some me-time. So, even if it doesn’t work, ride her for an hour or two. She needs that. At the very least.”

“Alright. Thanks, I guess,” replied Xavier as he lead the pegasus into the field nearby the stables.

He stared at the blue shimmering coat and the feathery wings and wondered aloud how to mount the horse when suddenly she bent her front knees, lowering herself. Awkwardly, he climbed on, in front of her wings and patted her neck.

“Thanks,” he muttered as he tried to get comfortable, not sure if he was too heavy for the creature at twice Arya’s weight.

Persephone began to trot and eventually she gave into a gallop, unhindered by her rider’s commands, because her rider had no idea how exactly to even command a pegasus. After about ten minutes of barely hanging on, she slowed down enough for Xavier to regain his seating and for him to grab her lead, pulling it gently. She stopped and fed on a patch of yellow dandelions.

“Okay, girl… We need to find Arya,” Xavier said, feeling foolish for talking to a horse. He glanced around to make sure no one was watching him as he proceeded to coax Persephone to find his sister. “Arya needs us. Do you think you can find her?”

Persephone’s ears flicked back at her name and Xavier knew that she understood him as she snorted and neighed.

“Okay,” he said, his breathing ragged but his voice strong. “Okay… Let’s find her.”

He thought of all the times when it was just the two of them, Arya and Xavier, hanging out at home, watching movies, making cookies and dinners while they waited for their mother. His heart ached with pain. The memories filled his soul with love. He missed his twin more than anything. Persephone began to flap her wings, pacing erratically, whining loudly. Xavier remembered how Arya bought a special halter for her pegasus. He stripped it off her head and with a loud, surprising pop, they were gone.

★★★

Arya wasn't sure when she was moved to a room with a window and a bed, but it had happened sometime during the sixth or seventh day of her imprisonment, she guessed. She woke to find herself in a beautifully decorated room with a four poster Queen bed, made up with a heavenly-soft teal duvet, a small mountain of pillows that matched in varying shades of light blue to darker teal. She rose from the bed and tried the door to no avail. It was locked. She tried a simple unlocking spell but it failed. She sighed with resentment.

Looking around, she was stunned by the stark contrast of her surroundings. Freed from her imprisonment in the dark, silent room, she was now confined to a lovely room with fancy furniture. There was a tray of food waiting on a small table with a chair, a dresser and an armoire, filled with dresses and other nice clothes that matched Arya's size exactly.

She sat and ate, staring out the window, which overlooked a clearing with a lake surrounded by thick forest. It was stunningly beautiful, she thought, as she gazed out at the serene scene. There weren't any other houses that she could see nearby but she did have a lilac bush beneath her open window that filled the room with the most magnificent scent. She was four stories up without a way down from the window, as the bush was more than twenty feet below. Still, she thought, it was a massive improvement from the black room and a mattress on the floor.

No one had been in to see her for a day and a night. It was the second morning in the new cage and her magic was still inaccessible. She could feel it as if it was locked away, struggling to be freed. It caused her physical pain and weakness but she had no idea how to help herself. If that wasn't bad enough, she thought, the boredom was worse now that she could see. When she'd been confined to the darkness, she'd slept to find freedom from her captivity but now, remembering the outside world existed, seeing it, having creature comforts, she felt more trapped than ever. She called at the door, first for Baan, then Lucien and Surya, but no one answer came. Meals were magically sent to her room, appearing on the small table between the armoire and the dresser.

On the third morning in the new room, as she at her breakfast, gazing out at the lake below, she saw Persephone appear, suddenly, with her brother astride her. Arya stuck her hand out the window, waving as hard as she could, trying to attract her brother's attention without letting anyone

know he was there but almost as soon as he appeared, he vanished. She let out a strangled cry and fell into the pillows on her bed, weeping. How was she ever going to get home? She felt her hope slipping away as she fell into a deep, troubled sleep.

★★★

Xavier was not enjoying the feel of teleporting. His stomach flip flopped with every trip, but he could feel the pegasus's longing for Arya and knew he couldn't quit, despite how queasy he felt. Persephone teleported Xavier to their old home's backyard in Peak's Village first. Xavier put the halter back onto the pegasus's head and led her into the cramped greenhouse, closing the door behind him, telling the horse he'd be right back. He ran into the house and realized his mother wasn't home and hadn't been since his sister disappeared at least. He watered the plants and collected her mail before leaving out the backdoor, returning to the greenhouse. He mounted Persephone again, taking her harness off once more and with a pop, they were off somewhere new.

This time to the Shadow Shoppes District, where Persephone had been sold to Arya. Frustrated, Xavier re-harnessed her and dismounted. He tied her to a bench and went from shop to shop, asking anyone if they had seen his sister or knew anything. The Wolf Shopkeepers turned him away at once, with an apology that they were forbidden from talking to anyone named Morningstar, insisting they meant no disrespect but their King had decreed it so.

"Aren't I your Prince?" Xavier had demanded, using his rank for the first time. The wolves had just shaken their heads, replying Baan was the First Wolf and Alpha of the Alphas, making him their true king.

The witches had been equally unhelpful, not because they refused, but because they knew nothing more than he did. He bought a few treats for his sister's pegasus from Julio Montoya's shop before he finally walked back to Persephone, who had chewed her way through half the lead by the time he returned.

"Great," he muttered, feeding her the apple he'd picked up and pocketing the other treats. "Let's try this again." He climbed onto her back, and filled his heart with as much love for his sister as he could.

“Help me find Arya and I’ll give you all the apples you’ll ever want,” he whispered to the horse as he pictured his sister’s flaming red hair, vibrant green eyes and ridiculous laugh. He needed to find his twin, he thought, his heart racing. The mare paced momentarily and then she teleported them somewhere completely new.

Xavier looked around and saw they were near a lake, in the middle of a clearing. Up the hill stood a large manor, at least four or five stories tall. The glare from the sun hitting the windows made him look away, shielding his eyes. He could hear voices from a distance and panic rose up in his throat. As if she sensed his apprehension, Persephone teleported away, back to the fields near the stables at the Academy. He jumped down, harnessing and leading her to her stable.

He called out as he entered. “Arryn! Arryn!”

There was an eery silence as he walked through the stables. The unicorns weren’t there at all but the hippogriffs had somehow escaped their stalls and were pecking at something on the floor. As Xavier approached the scene, he realized the carnage he was looking at was the stable master, bleeding on the floor. Not knowing what to do, he released Persephone’s lead and chased the hippogriffs out into the field, where they took flight. Running back into the barn, he tried to heal him the same way he’d healed Amber but it didn’t work. Picking up the broken immortal’s body, he ran to the hospital wing as fast as he could, barely registering the weight of a fully grown man in his arms.

The Head Healer ran up to Xavier and took Arryn from him. In moments, her skilled hands had him breathing and resting peacefully. She’d set him up for an infusion of blood and placed him under blue lights, she’d explained would help the immortal heal faster. Xavier sat next to his bedside, covered in Arryn’s dried blood, forgetting the manor by the lake completely, just as he forgot to tell anyone that the supernatural creatures had escaped until much later. His mind was exhausted and overwhelmed and the Healer, sensing his need for true rest, handing him a small cup of tea and placed him in a bed nearby. Finishing the last drop of tea, he barely had time to put the cup down before he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

★★★

Arya woke sometime in the night to see her meal had been delivered, earlier than usual. Only this time, it was accompanied by a note.

Be presentable at first light. Wear the black dress. - Baan

Arya groaned as she picked a piece of mango up and popped it in her mouth. It was only an hour until dawn, she guessed, and stepped into the small bathroom with a shower, toilet and sink to clean up. After washing her hair as best she could without any products, she wrapped it in a towel and walked to the armoire, opening it to reveal a lone black dress. She snorted at the ridiculousness of the situation, slipping the dress on.

It was floor-length and simple, with long sleeves and a plain black collar. She brushed her hair out, allowing it to drip on the dress and let it dry on its own, forming wild, untamed curls. She found a pair of black flats in the armoire and placed them on her feet. Looking in the mirror, she thought she looked like she was headed for a guillotine or the stake to be burned. All that was missing was the bonnet.

After she was dressed and ready, she sat on the corner of the bed, watching the door, waiting. Her anxiety grew moment by moment. First her blood ran cold and then her skin felt hot. She wanted to run to the window and open it as wide as she could but she sat frozen, afraid, unsure of what Baan had planned for her next.

Finally the door to Arya's room opened and Surya entered, her face hollowed but smiling. She was wearing a similar dress to Arya's and the same shoes. Her hair was pulled back into a single french braid with black lace ribbons tying it together at the bottom, resting between her shoulder blades.

"I'm glad I came early," she said softly. "Father will want your hair done up."

"You're not touching my hair," Arya said with certainty and force.

Surya's eyes widened in surprise and she nodded. "Very well. Father will be displeased, but it is your hair."

"Like I care? He's kept me prisoner for over a week!"

Surya's face flickered but she didn't comment further.

"What is going on?" Arya demanded to know.

“Tonight…” she began, avoiding eye contact with Arya. “My father is going to finally call his twin back to him.” Surya shifted uncomfortably. “I’m sorry for it. You don’t deserve what is happening to you. I wish I could do something but he’s my father…”

“So he’s going to kill me?” Arya wanted to know more but just then her head began to split in pain and she heard the chanting. She cried out in agony as she collapsed onto her knees, clutching her ears. “Why?!”

“I’m so, so sorry.”

Surya muttered something and Arya’s body was lifted off the floor, into a standing position. Arya’s hands were still over her ears, tears streaming down her face with her eyes closed tightly in agony. Surya guided her out the door without bumping into the frame or the walls. Arya’s head was splitting but she knew Surya was being as gentle as possible, which caused her to both love and loathe the girl.

“Please let me go,” Arya moaned. “I didn’t do anything wrong. I don’t deserve this.” Surya said nothing as she brought Arya down the three flights of stairs. “Please!”

She felt different as she left the cloaking of the manor. She was still bound, unable to access her natural magic but she felt the connections to her brother and familiar restore themselves. In that moment, she silently called out to Xavier, praying he would find her. She reached out to her familiar to help her. Just then in the distance, she heard the faint pop she knew well and could feel Persephone nearby. She was still in agony and floating in the air against her will. She’d have to wait for an opening so she could escape.

She moaned loudly. “Let me go!”

“I’m so sorry, Arya, but I can’t help you,” Surya whispered, setting her down gently on the wet grass. The chanting was loud and continuous.

Arya opened her eyes and saw the water lapping on the lakeshore just ten feet away. There were six fires lit, with a mixture forming the symbol of the aether, a double triangle symbol where one is inverted and placed on the other. She’d been obsessively reading about magic rituals and symbolism essential to spell-casting since arriving at the Academy. It hit her suddenly and she knew what Baan had planned. The Aether was a symbol of transfiguration, with the literal ability to convert one thing into another if called upon in the right ritual, using the right spell.

“NO! NO! NO!” She screamed. “Surya, please! You have to get me out of here! He’s going to steal my body! He’s going to bring Aya here, but IN me!” Arya cried to Surya who simply backed away, shaking her head, shrugging and looking ashamed.

“PLEASE! PERSEPHONE, GO FIND MY MOTHER!” She screamed out to her pegasus, who teleported away with a pop.

Surya’s eyes squinted in confusion briefly before widening, realizing what was happening. “Sisters, cloak us now!”

It was too late. Lilith was mounted on Persephone’s back. Her hair blowed wildly in the wind.

“Sisters, shield us!”

Lilith hopped off the pegasus’s back and chanted something foreign, moving her hands in complex, deliberate ways. Arya felt the cage door to her magic open and flood through her body once again, like electricity burning through her veins, static on her skin. Arya stood up, her mind finally free of pain. She tried to cross lines of the aether but was trapped inside still.

“Arya! Repeat after me!” Lilith cried out to her daughter as Baan began to run towards them from the far side of the clearing. “*Haec vincula praevaricator*.”

“*Haec vincula praevaricator.”*

“*Huius libera animam meam!*” Lilith called out, preparing to stand her ground against Baan, who was shifting from human to wolf mid-run.

“*Huius libera animam meam!*” Arya repeated.

“*Transform uno in alium, verum sui!*” Lilith screamed as Baan jumped at her throat, a pure black wolf, nearly as large as a bear. Lilith repelled him at the last minute.

“Transform uno in alium, verum sui!”

Arya hoped she said the words right. Just as she said the last syllable, her body was thrust into the air. A blinding light illuminated her and excruciating pain came from both sides of her shoulder blades. She screamed out as the pain exploded from her body in the form of two glorious, glittering silvery white feathered wings.

“Holy crap!” She gasped aloud. “I’ve got wings!”

Her mother fought Baan, barely fending him off. She tried to escape her magical cage again, but this time she used her newly grown wings to lift

her from the magic barrier that kept her imprisoned. After she flew straight up over a hundred feet, she could feel the barrier weaken and pushed her way through. Finally free, she flew straight down towards Baan. She kicked him off her mother in his wolf form, grabbing hold of her mother, lifting her into the sky. She whistled for Persephone to follow.

A brief moment of victory was shattered as Arya screamed. Something pierced her back but she fought to keep flying. Another something pierced her right wing and she began to fall. As a third arrow hit her in the chest she realized they were all tipped with iron.

She fell to the ground in a heap. Lilith tried to pick Arya up and put her on Persephone but Baan was on them before she could, Persephone teleporting away just before the wolf reached them.

Baan transformed back into a man and smiled at his mother. "Wonderful! You will make an even better vessel for my dear sister." He turned to the thirteen girls standing around the Aether symbol. "Please get my mother ready and get rid of that." He motioned at Arya's mangled, motionless body.

Lilith tried not to show emotion as she silently put a glamour on her daughter, making it seem as if she was dead. The truth of it, Arya was badly hurt but still, just barely alive.

"Take me if you want, but send my daughter's body to her brother. He should have his twin, should he not?" Lilith was not allowing him to make her quiver in fear, although she knew she was outmatched.

"Why would I do that?" Baan laughed at his mother's plea. "She is meaningless now. Just a corpse he'll have to burn."

"Do you want him to hate you as you hate me?" She said simply, ignoring the cruelty in how he spoke of her daughter. "Give him this small mercy! Please."

Baan narrowed his eyes and turned to his daughters. "Send the body back… but keep the wings," he laughed at his mother's disgust. "I've always wanted Nephilim wings."

Arya woke and knew to lay as still as possible, despite the pain she was in. She could feel her body wanting to heal around the iron tipped arrows, but without pulling the iron out, she was still bleeding. She tried not to shift or moan as she called out to her brother one final time, just as the

sun was beginning to turn the sky bright fuchsia. She drifted out of consciousness, praying her brother would come and save her.

★★★

Xavier woke with a start, running away from the hospital wing as quickly as he could to find Madoc. He knew where she was, he was sure of it. He just needed a portal to get there. In the time it took him to run to Madoc's office in the Southernmost tower below the Portal Room, he knew in his heart that his sister was in mortal danger and he needed to get to her before it was too late.

"Madoc, I need you," Xavier came using into Madoc's office to see his father standing there. "Father," he said, quickly bowing. "I know where Arya is and I need Madoc to create a portal."

Lucifer's eyes glowed red with rage as he nodded. "I'm coming too," he replied. Madoc grabbed his purple knit cap off the desk and scurried up the stairs to the portal room.

"Where to, my boy?" He asked. "Where to?"

"It's this manor by a lake. I was there earlier with the pegasus. Is there any way you can, I don't know, magically trace my pony hops?"

"Pony hops?" Lucifer said, disgruntled.

"It's what Arya calls teleporting on a pegasus," Xavier explained, trying not to sound frustrated that Lucifer was there.

"Pony hops, indeed!" Madoc said cheerily, his natural optimism taking over. "It's been done a few times, but I'll need you to open your mind."

"He will not. Find another way, Wizard." Lucifer had made it clear he did not care for or trust warlocks during his two-week reign on the Academy.

"I cannot, my king, Lord of Darkness!" Madoc nervously quipped, twisting his cap in his hands. "Without the pegasus, which has been missing since the stable master's attack, we only have the Prince's memories to call upon."

"I'll do it," Xavier said, his voice filled with determination. "If this is how I save my sister, then I'll do it."

Lucifer growled but said nothing further.

Madoc put his knit cap back on his head and placed one hand on either side of Xavier's face, his palms on Xavier's temples. He closed his eyes and began to chant. "*Aperire portas animi. Aperire portas animi. Aperire portas animi.*"

A vision of the lake and the manor, of Xavier on the pegasus's back, the glare of the sunlight flashed through Madoc's mind. "I've got it." He smiled at the boy, not taking his hand from his head.

"*Haec animum cohibere,*" the warlock repeated the spell three times and released Xavier's head.

Xavier's ears rang slightly. "What?"

"To keep your mind safe from further intrusions, my boy! Best to be safe than sorry," the warlock explained and he began to chant again, this time under his breath and a portal appeared.

A pounding up the stairs preluded the arrival of Amber, Theo and the Lastrange sisters. "You know where Arya is?" Amber asked, seeing the portal. "We're coming with you."

"By all means," Lucifer replied, beckoning her to enter the portal first.

She nodded and took a deep breath before stepping in, quickly followed by her friends and then Xavier. Finally Lucifer pushed Madoc in before him. As he opened his eyes on the other side of the portal, Lucifer saw his daughter shot with iron arrows crumpled and his queen struggling to break free from a magical enclosure.

Baan and his witches hadn't noticed the portal open, but as soon as the small group stepped through, they were at war. The witches broke up, some protecting their ritual but others choosing to fight back. A blue electricity-filled-energy ball struck Caliope's shoulder, instantly knocking her down.

Amber looked back in time to see another ball being formed by an enemy witch and just as she was about to form her own, wings bursting from Lucifer's back, shielding the group from the onslaught of magical energy balls and iron tipped arrows. Unlike Arya's wings, his were armored. They were magnificent to behold, with each feather dipped in a silvery steel-like substance, creating an armored appearance that effectively protected the young witches.

Clarissa and Claire grabbed their unconscious sister's hand and began to whisper in unison. Suddenly a purplish orb formed between them, growing and expanding to enclose the members of their small army. As it

formed a barrier, Lucifer relaxed his wings and nodded approvingly at the young witches, who couldn't help but beam with pride.

"Free your mother," Lucifer called to his son, turning around to face Baan, who'd taken his wolf form once again.

Arya woke when she heard Lucifer's voice and realized the chanting had stopped. She moaned in pain as she used the distraction to dig one of the arrows out of her body. She nearly screamed out as it finally popped out with a gush of blood. "One," she said quietly to herself as she tried to push another out.

"Let me help." Out of nowhere, Amber was crouching over her body. "I'll get the one out of your wing," she said. An arrow went flying by them and Arya gasped. "Don't worry, Arya," Amber whispered as she pushed the arrow out at last. "Claire, Caliope and Clarissa are here. They're shielding us."

An energy ball hit the shield the Lastrange sisters were holding with determination. As Arya cried with relief and pain, the last arrow was removed. She could feel her body slowly begin to heal as she hugged Amber tightly.

"Thank you! I never thought I'd see you again," Arya cried. Looking over Amber's shoulder at the Lastrange sisters. "You girls are amazing! Thank you!"

Releasing her friend, she looked around to see Baan and Lucifer brawling, growling and bleeding. Baan was in a mixed wolf-human form, his head fully wolf, his hands transformed into paws with long sharp claws. Lucifer was using his wings like swords, slashing at the werewolf king. Both creatures were covered in blood and mud. Both were wounded but unwilling to give in or give up. The snarls from Baan were as equally as frightening as Lucifer's own growls.

Behind them, she could see Xavier and Theo rushing toward the Aether where there mother fought to escape. Arya felt her wings were healed, so without thinking, she flew into the air high above the skirmish. Diving into the ritual symbol, she grabbed onto her mother, just as Xavier cut his hand to add blood to the spell's barrier. The addition of angelic blood breaking the protective circle, as Madoc had suggested.

The witches started to chant again. Theo was unsure of what to do so he punched the closest witch right in the face. She fell with a scream, and

the chanting stopped. The witches broke into small groups, using their combined strength to ward off Theo and Xavier, who were physically attacking any witch they could reach.

Suddenly, a glowing orb of purple energy hit two of the witches chanting. Theo looked over his shoulder where it came from and saw Lilith standing there, forming another purple orb and throwing it at another set of witches. Theo took a swing at another witch, bringing her down.

Baan and Lucifer continued to fight and had shape-shifted again during their fight. Baan was in his full wolf form, biting and snarling, but Lucifer had transformed into the Baphomet form of Satan, complete with wings and goat's head. He was ramming Baan as hard as he could, drawing blood. Baan's wolf form attempted to attack Lucifer's ankles, but Lucifer lowered himself and threw back Baan with his horns, gouging the wolf in the hind quarters. Landing with a thud twenty feet away, Baan scrambled to his feet and looked around. Sensing defeat, he fled into the thick brush of trees, still in his wolf form.

Lucifer shifted back into his human form, pulling a handkerchief from his pants pocket and wiping the blood from his face, Unlike the top of his suit, which was shredded and torn into rags, his pants were in nearly pristine condition, minus some blood and mud. Lucifer unbuttoned the remaining bits of shirt and let it fall to the ground, revealing his well-toned upper body that caused Claire to immediately blush, the protective shield falling from her distraction.

Most of the witches had been taken out by Lilith after she'd been freed, leaving only Surya standing alone, with her hands raised above her head.

"I'm sorry!" She cried. "I was only doing what my father commanded!"

Arya jumped in front of the girl, putting her hands up. Everyone stopped. "Don't kill her! Please. Let her live… She was kind to me," Arya pleaded. "She helped me as much as she could… She gave me food and comfort when possible. Don't hurt her. Please… Give her a chance to change. Let's bring her back to the Academy with us."

"You can't be serious," Xavier retorted. "How naive are you? She literally helped someone almost kill you."

“I absolutely can,” Arya replied, angrily. “I’m the one who was hurt and nearly sacrificed to bring back Aya. Surya told me the entire time, she was honest and sorry for her part!” Arya turned to Lilith, begging with her eyes. “Besides, she’s Latoya’s cousin.”

Lilith looked at Surya in surprise and smiled. “And my granddaughter, I believe.” Surya slowly lowered her arms and wiped a tear from her eye.

“I’m Surya Steward, my lady queen,” Surya bowed low, nearly on her knees. She sobbed. “I am so, so, so sorry! My father took my sisters and I from our mothers when we first ascended into our magic…” Her cries grew silent as her face contorted with pain. “He killed one of our sisters because she refused to help him… I didn’t know what to do!”

“Please! Give her a chance!” Arya begged again. She turned to her mother, “Mom, please! She shouldn’t have to suffer because her father’s a psycho!” Surya said nothing, tears streaming down her face as she waited for a verdict.

“No way!” Xavier protested. “This is insane. She should be locked away the same way they did to you!”

“An eye for an eye, Xavy? That makes everyone blind! We have to do better,” Arya argued. “Be better!”

“Children,” Lilith tried to interfere.

“You cannot trust someone who kidnaps you, Ya! What are you thinking?” The rest of the group stood around, waiting for the judgement.

“You don’t even know her! She’s the only one who cared enough to treat me like a person!” Arya yelled back at her brother. “Trust me, even if you can’t trust her!”

“I grow weary of this,” Lucifer said finally. “Let us return to the Academy.” Turning to Amber, he sighed heavily. “Burn that down, Little Witch,” he commanded.

Amber looked to Lilith, who nodded subtly. “*Item Ignis*, *Item Ignis, Item Ignis.*”

The Manor that had held Arya captive caught fire. She fell silent as the structure was engulfed in a raging inferno.

“I hate this place,” Surya whispered to herself, as she watched the blaze.

“Then let’s go and never look back,” Arya said, taking Surya’s hand and pulling her to her feet. “Promise you will never act against us again and

I will fight for you."

Disbelief clouded Surya's face. "Why? After what we did to you?"

Taking Amber's hand in her opposite hand, Arya leaned against Amber and walked from the fire toward Madoc.

"I already explained… You were kind and as Latoya's cousin," Arya trailed off, the exhaustion hitting her suddenly. "Just don't expect anything from me… and don't make me regret this…"

Surya nodded as she helped Amber half-carry Arya to where the others were gathered, waiting for the portal back. Madoc lit candles at the five points and drawn a circle with salt, connecting each of the five points as a pentagram within the circle. Then he began to mutter and soon the shimmering pool formed.

Madoc motioned the Lastrange sisters through first, holding it open for Theo and Xavier to follow. Surya, Arya and Amber went next. Lilith stood with Lucifer alone for a moment, as Madoc strained to hold the portal open.

"Thank you for helping me save our daughter," she said softly. Her green eyes met his dark pools, relief filling them with tears.

"I would do it all again, my queen," Lucifer said, a slight smile on his lips as he approached her slowly, as not to scare her. Madoc grunted in discomfort as the royal couple ignored him. Lucifer pulled Lilith into his arms and she let him, wrapping her hands around his neck. "I still love you, my queen."

"You've never loved me," she whispered in reply.

Lucifer's smile grew and he laughed deeply. "I've always wanted to love you," his laugh still in his voice. "I've always wanted you, only ever you."

Just as he leaned in to kiss her, she pulled away, shaking her head, her breathing ragged. "We can't do this, Lucifer."

She turned and stepped through the portal, disappearing from sight. Lucifer's face fell grim and he looked back at the house that had fallen in on itself from the intensity of the blaze.

"Your Majesty," Madoc groaned. "I can't hold it for much longer!"

Lucifer nodded and stepped into the glimmering pool, followed swiftly by Madoc. Nearly the moment they were through, the portal disappeared. They returned to the portal room in the southernmost tower of the Academy.

★★★

“Welcome back, My King,” Madame Dupont said in her singsong voice, bowing along with Sabrina Michaels at his arrival. “I am pleased to see the return of our princess and I hope this means the Academy can return to normal.”

“We are so happy Arya is safe! And Xavier too! Such a wonderful outcome.” Sabrina’s cheery optimism was met with a grimace.

Madoc stayed quiet and quickly moved behind the headmistress as if to use her as a buffer between himself and the King of Hell. Lucifer was alone in the portal room with Madoc Weatherly, Sabrina Michaels and Madame Dupont. The others had left before his return. Lucifer said nothing and began to descend down the tower’s spiral staircase, ignoring the headmistress and head witch entirely.

At the bottom of the tower, the group was gathered. The Lastrange sisters were talking to Surya with Theo and Amber quietly while Lilith was holding her children, hugging them close to her. It was a rather awkward display as Xavier was much taller than Lilith, who was much taller than Arya, but they fit together like pieces of a puzzle. Their closeness comforted the small family. Arya wept heavily and Xavier looked up, his warm eyes meeting Lucifer’s own cold ones. Lucifer watched as Xavier squeezed his sister tightly in response and closed his eyes.

“Children,” Lucifer said at last. “I have decided you will not stay at the Academy any longer but will join the royal residence.”

“NO!” Xavier said as Arya shouted, “but our friends.”

“Your mother will be joining you, and you may also invite any witch you wish to join our residence to be your companions.” Lucifer finally looked from Madame Dupont’s red face to Sabrina Michaels’ pale one. “My children were not safe here. I blame you, Madame Dupont. You are no longer Headmistress here. You are to pack your bags and move to my residence. You too, Madame Michaels. You are no longer a teacher here but will instead educate my children at our palace.”

“Lucifer,” Lilith began. Lucifer turned his cold eyes to his wife and she went silent.

“Master Weatherly,” the King continued. “You will keep up with your lessons with my son, the Prince. As such, you are invited to court.” Lucifer

then walked quickly down the corridor and exiting through a door, leaving the group standing in confusion and denial.

"Mom?" Arya finally said. "I don't want to leave here!"

"We will do as he commands," Lilith said, her voice flat. She followed Lucifer's path, leaving her children standing with their friends.

"So I guess this wasn't our destiny after all," Xavier scoffed. "I honestly liked this place. I was just getting used to it."

"Well, I'm not leaving," Arya declared and ran down the hall after her mother.

"Crap! Arya, no! You don't know what he's been like!" Xavier called out, chasing after her.

The rest of the group ran after the twins, catching up with them in the grand foyer. Arya stood in the middle of the room with her arms crossed over her chest and a determined, resentful look on her face.

"Listen to me, Your Majesty. I am not leaving this place that you forced us to go to NOT EVEN A MONTH AFTER WE GOT HERE!" Arya screamed. "I don't deserve to be treated like this after I went through hell!"

"You don't even know what Hell is, sweet Daughter," Lucifer laughed dryly at his daughter's dramatics. "You will leave and you will leave tonight."

"No. I won't! You're just some dead beat jerk! I don't have to listen to you!" She stood there, glaring at Lucifer who seemed amused by her theatrics. Lucifer looked at Lilith, almost helplessly and she shook her head. "Mom! Please! You know we deserve to have a normal life! Well… as normal as we can get!"

"She's right, my king." Amber surprised the group by speaking up. "Arya is excelling in her studies here as is Xavier. They had finally settled in when the trouble happened. We love them here at the Academy. Our vote, if it counts, is that they stay."

Claire Lastrange stepped forward, leaning the still-wounded Caliope against Clarissa. "Please! Your Majesty, please do not let this one terrible thing make you change your mind about the Academy. This place is everything to us and the Prince and Princess are part of our family here now. If they leave, we'll be broken."

Arya's face brightened as she realized her friends were on her side.

“Lucifer, perhaps you were too hasty in your decision,” Lilith suggested. Her voice was light and persuasive.

Lucifer’s expression hadn’t changed, but his eyes flickered between each twin and Lilith. He sighed, visibly annoyed and outnumbered. “Very well. They may stay, but, Madame Dupont,” Lucifer growled in warning, meeting Madame Dupont’s wide, fear filled eyes, “if any such security breech happens again and either of my children are put at risk, you will be put to death.” Lucifer’s dead eyes and frosty voice made his threat all the more chilling.

Sabrina Michaels audibly sighed with relief, causing Lucifer’s gaze to shift to her. She squealed and bowed quickly before fleeing the room. A smirk flickered on Lucifer’s lips before turning his stony stare on Surya Steward.

Ignoring him, Arya ran to her mother and hugged her in joy. Xavier picked up Theo, squeezing him in a tight hug and laughed as he put the smaller boy down. The Lastrange sisters, holding up a wounded and dazed Caliope, hugged Amber as Surya stared at her feet, alone in the crowd of people celebrating.

“Now, what to do with you?” Lucifer’s voice spreading fear through Surya’s body. “You must be punished for your crimes against your Princess.”

Surya fell to her knees, fighting back tears. Clasping her hands together, she begged. “Her mercy! Please! I beg of you, Your Majesty.”

“No!” Arya ran in front of Surya, standing between the girl and her father. “I won’t let you do anything to her!”

“Lucifer, she was being an obedient daughter,” Lilith said, diplomatically defending her new grandchild. “We cannot punish her for that. It would be a sin if she disobeyed him. Don’t you agree, Dear Husband? Isn’t that what your God commands? When we find Baan, you may punish him for his crimes against our family, including this poor child! And all those poor souls that fell because of him..”

Lilith seemed to reach some part of Lucifer that saw her reason and nodded. “Perhaps she can teach that… respect… to our own daughter.”

Still, his attitude shifted and his eyes returned to their passive dark wells. He paused for a moment, in thought. As if an idea struck him, he smiled menacingly. “As my daughter has no maids, you will serve my

daughter as her handmaiden now and until she dismisses you from her service due to old age or death, whichever she decides. All your needs will be met and you will be educated alongside the Princess as to serve her best."

He paused, waiting for the sobbing to end. Surya mumbled thanks between grateful cries. Finally, Surya managed to quiet down and Lucifer continued. "Your father will be condemned to the deepest, darkest pits of Hell as punishment for his crimes against the princess. And since he cannot die, he will be condemned to that confinement for the rest of time."

Lucifer turned and walked up the steps to the front doors. He stopped as his hand hit the knob and glanced over his shoulder.

Lilith called out. "Where are you going, my king?"

"I am going to hunt Baan down. I am going to kill that son of his, and I'm going to end this war he wished to start."

Lucifer's eyes flashed red with rage as he opened the door, slamming it behind him. Lilith looked around the grand foyer to discover they were being watched by half the student population so she straightened up and smiled.

"Headmistress," she said loudly. "Let's have a celebratory feast tomorrow in honor of the Princess's safe return!"

As the students applauded, Madame Dupont bowed briefly. "Thank you, my queen."

Lilith walked to the front door. The twins followed her closely. "Have a wonderful night, children!"

When the applause stopped, the kids began to gossip amongst themselves.

"I need to leave," Lilith said quietly to the twins.

"You're going to try to find Baan first, aren't you?" Arya asked. Xavier scoffed.

Lilith nodded, grimly. "Hell is no place for a son of mine," she whispered, touching Xavier's cheek lightly. "I need to end this myself."

Arya and Xavier nodded and embraced their mother tightly.

"Be safe, Mommy," Arya's voice was muffled as her face pressed into Lilith's neck.

"Yea… We love you, Mom," Xavier kissed the top of his mother's head.

Letting go, the twins stood back as their mother opened the front door. She blew one last kiss to them and was gone, shutting the door softly behind her.

Chapter Twelve

The Headmistress returned minutes after Lilith left and insisted everyone needed to stop by the hospital wing before returning to their rooms to get some sleep. Classes were resuming the next morning, she declared. The students had wasted enough valuable time. Madame Dupont knew they needed to learn to use their magic much quicker than she anticipated. She told the group to expect new schedules in the morning along with the new incoming students that had been delayed as a security precaution.

She announced there would no longer be Mortal Studies at the Academy as there was no place for their kind amongst mortals. Arya had protested for a moment before giving up from sheer exhaustion and followed the Lastrange sisters to the hospital wing.

Only Caliope and Arya had to stay in the hospital wing overnight. Just to be safe, the Head Healer had told them after she mended their broken bodies. Arryn Bloodmaker had made a full recovery and was angrily insisting he be allowed to wrangle all the creatures that had escaped after being attacked. The Head Healer refused him, stating he needed just one more night to be top notch. Arya tried to ask him about it, but he'd glared at her as if he hated her and turned away. The Head Healer handed her a cup of tea and watched as she finished the entire thing. While Arya was troubled

by the stable master's reaction, her exhaustion won the battle, and soon she was in a deep, dream filled sleep.

Her mind was overwhelmed with thoughts of Baan. As she drifted into her dream state, he became the central figure in her vision. Arya tried to interact with him but she realized she was merely a witness and so she followed her eldest brother into a memory of what once was. She saw his face grow younger, more innocent and watched as Aya, her doppelgänger sister, embraced him as Arya had hugged Xavier many times. She felt the love the two had for each other and watched as they picked berries and laughed, chasing each other in the clearing near the hut they shared with their mother. Her mother. It was dusk when Lilith's voice called out for her children. Arya's stomach fluttered as she turned toward the memory of her mother. There she was, wearing an animal skin hide as a tunic, her red hair dreaded and beaded, her skin bronzed by the sun.

Arya followed Baan and Aya in awe as they ran to her. She held two small leather-wrapped bundles out to the original twins, who happily took the gifts and unbound the twine holding the pouches together. Within each was a gift for her child, a small carved figurine of the Goddess and an amulet pouch to be worn around the neck. It was their birthday, Arya realized. They were sixteen and it was their ascension night.

Arya listened as her mother spoke an ancient language she couldn't understand but she knew, somehow, that Lilith was telling the twins about their destiny, their access to the Goddess's magic. Aya's face glowed with excitement but Baan was not so optimistic. He seemed to be afraid. None of the other villagers had this curse. He didn't want it. Give the Goddess back her magic, Arya thought she heard him beg. Aya was shocked at her brother's reaction, disappointed in his cowardice. Baan was angry and Aya taunted him more. Lilith stood between them and cast a spell that put them into a deep sleep.

Time flew by in the dream and suddenly, Lilith stood with her two children under the light of the full moon, just as she had done with Arya and her own twin brother. She watched as her mother called upon the same powers that had filled Arya with the very magic flowing through her veins and poured it into Aya and Baan's still unconscious bodies. Arya watched as they levitated off their altars and light burst from each of them, blinding her for a moment. Falling softly back to the altar, they woke a moment later,

sitting slowly up. Lilith smiled at her children, welcoming them to their fate. Aya was the first to climb down from the altar, moving with an awkward grace Arya recognized. She was feeling the power, the electricity in her veins and static on her skin.

Within a moment, Aya held her hands a few inches apart and closed her eyes, focusing. Arya was surprised to see her sister had mastered her ability to create an energy ball within moments of ascending, and even more shocked when she watched Aya throw the energy ball directly at Baan, who was still sitting on the Altar, too afraid to move.

Arya's scream was nothing compared to Lilith's. Throwing a defensive shield between her two children, Lilith fell to the ground, praying to the Goddess. Baan stared helplessly at his mother, bleeding from his shoulder, as Aya created another weaponized energy ball. She threw it as hard as she could at her mother. Lilith, not expecting such a reaction from her child, was caught unprepared and hit in the chest. She gasped and fell to the ground as the shield came down. Baan's magic was different, defensive, and just as Aya sent another energy ball his way, he jumped impossibly high causing it to miss him by a hair. Landing, Baan took one look at his fallen mother before running impossibly fast from his sister, who seemed satisfied with this. Arya's mind clouded again as she was transported to another time and place.

Baan was older now, his upper body, while muscular and toned, was scarred. He was standing in front of a stone and mud house in a small village, unmoving. It was night and he was nearly hidden in the darkness. He was watching a family through a window that had been left open in the heat of the night. Arya could feel his desire to be amongst them but his fear held him back and made him resentful. She felt his anger ripple off him as he watched through the window.

Turning her attention from Baan to the family inside, Arya understood. It was Adam, Baan's doppelgänger, and Eve, a beautiful dark-skinned woman with wild, coiled hair. There was a young woman holding a baby and a few small children running around the home as Eve prepared the evening meal, laughing with the younger version of her. Adam sat in the corner with a young boy, teaching him to carve using stone and wood.

Almost as if Adam could sense Baan, he put down the stone and wood and stood, crossing the room in two swift steps. He opened the animal hide

curtain and stared at his son. Baan stood tall and held a hand up. He introduced himself to Adam, who crossed the space between them and embraced Baan in a tight hug, kissing his cheek and head. Adam pulled Baan inside. Eve smiled and welcomed him and the young woman handed her baby to Baan within moments of meeting him. Arya felt his anger ease and joy fill him as she watched his father invite him into his family without hesitation. Moments later, the memory faded and she was thrust into another.

Baan, filled with rage, argued with Adam, who stood in front of someone, blocking them from Baan's wrath. Adam was angry, disappointed in his son. Baan must be tainted like his mother to attack his sister like this, Arya swore she heard Adam say. A barely bleeding Aya moved into Arya's vision wearing a small, taunting smile on her lips. Baan tried to defend himself but Aya feigned tears and agony when Adam turned towards her.

His larger body enveloped Aya's protectively, defensively, against Baan, who tried to stand in Adam's way, to make him listen. Adam refused, pushing past Baan and handing his daughter to Eve. She looked at Aya with suspicious yet sympathetic eyes, leading her into the house. Adam turned to Baan in anger and pointed away from his home, banishing Baan from his family. Return to your cursed mother, he said. Never come here again. Arya watched as Baan hung his head in defeat and walked from his father's village into the sunset.

The memory tried to fade from her mind, but she fought it. She focused on Aya, her immortal vampire sister, who was still very much a witch. She wanted to understand Aya's cruel taunts against her own twin as Arya could never imagine hurting Xavier for a moment. The image in her mind strengthened and she was shown something unexpected.

Aya and Baan were small children, maybe three or four, playing with rocks and sticks in the mud, like any child from any era. They were giggling and getting dirty, happy and without malice. Lilith watched over them, smiling peacefully, content with that moment. Arya watched as Aya created a butterfly in her hands with mud and willed it to life. Baan whispered magic into a large stone, turning it into a small wolf pup. Delighted with their abilities, they showed their mother. Arya saw her mother fake her joy and allowed her children to keep their creations.

Hours quickly passed and suddenly day was night, Lilith sat naked in the moonlight. Her hands were uplifted to the Goddess, begging for help. Take their magic until they can control it, until they grow, she prayed. The Goddess, in her divine goodness and love, answered Lilith's prayers.

Aya, in her anger over losing her connection to her magic, grew furious and dark. She murdered the puppy Baan had created in front of his eyes and laughed as he wept into the night. Her cruelty did not end there. She killed all of her mother's livestock and watched as it rotted, useless and meaningless. Aya's wrath cooled over time, but she never felt sorry for her terrible deeds. Baan learned to stay away from her, afraid of her from that day on.

Arya watched as days passed and Aya's moods would swing between tormenting her brother and ignoring him completely. Lilith tried to shower her daughter in love and life, flowers and beautiful things. She tried to show her how to be kind but Aya simply learned to mimic those emotions and sentiments, learning to manipulate everyone around her. Arya finally understood Baan's hatred of his twin sister and shuddered.

Arya's mind raced from memory to memory over the short hours of slumber, although she would wake to consider them nothing more than dreams Weeks would go by before she realized the significance of her dreams. It wouldn't be until one day, near the end of Term, when she discovered the tea she drank before she slept was used to induce visions as well as healing and connect the revelations to the truth.

★★★

Xavier, unlike his sister, was not getting much sleep. He snuck out of his dorm while Theo slept and found his way to Madoc's office, where he spent the entire night reading a few of the books Madoc had pointed out to him about astral projection. Madoc was not there but a small black cat had curled up on his desk covered in papers. Madoc's familiar, Xavier assumed, as he climbed the bookshelves precariously, unable to levitate and cursing himself for not asking about that sooner. As it was, Xavier had a mission. One he had to succeed in if he was ever to keep his family, his mother and his sister, safe.

Finally, he managed to reach the top shelf where the books he sought sat and softly tossed them, one by one, onto the sofa. Carefully, he climbed down and moved the books to one side, sitting on the other. Opening them, he chuckled to himself, startling the cat, who mewed and circled before settling down once more. Arya would never believe that he was pulling an all-nighter to study. That was her thing, not his, but this was different.

Understanding his power was vital to mastering it and he needed to master it. Xavier was trying to find a way to Astral Project and cloak his presence but he had no idea how to do it. He'd barely had enough time to learn anything before his sister had been kidnapped and they'd been so focused on finding her, he hadn't retained much else. Not to mention, Xavier was trying to master this special gift that so few had ever even been given, let alone mastered themselves and wrote about it.

Still, he opened the first book and began to read, more carefully than he ever had before. Each word was savored before he devoured the next. Time flew by as quickly as the pages in the books, the sun slowly crept up, surprising Xavier with its presence. As the first beam of sunlight hit his face, he rushed to put the books on a table, hoping Madoc would think he'd forgotten to reshelve them. Sneaking down the spiral staircase, Xavier prayed he wouldn't see anyone as he ran to his dorm but his prayers went unanswered.

"Master Morningstar," a cheery voice called from behind as he opened the door from the corridor to the grand foyer. "How lovely to see you up before the crows!"

Xavier's shoulders fell and he turned with a sheepish grin to face Sabrina Michaels. Her mousy brown hair was tied back this morning instead of wildly dancing about her face and she wore a large smile on her face, a bright pink sweater with a cat smiling and pink pajama bottoms with pink kitty slippers. Xavier couldn't help but smile at the sight. She might not have been a stunning beauty, he thought, but she was cute… for a teacher.

"Madame Michaels, heyya… I was just… love your slippers," he finally managed to choke out.

"Why thank you, Master Morningstar," she said looking down at them. "I see you are not wearing slippers and I believe I saw you come from

Master Weatherly's tower… I know he was not present so I must ask, what were you doing in there?" Xavier sighed and shrugged.

"Would you believe me if I said studying?" Sabrina's eyebrow rose but she remained smiling.

"Yes, Master Morningstar, I would. Now, please return to your dormitory before anyone else realizes you've been studying all night. Go on," she said, turning back toward her office, and presumably her living quarters.

Xavier grinned as he hurried through the grand foyer and up the stairs that led to his room. Creeping quietly into the room, he slid off his shoes and tiptoed to his bed, pulling back the sheets and crawling inside. Just as his head hit the pillow, he passed out from the fatigue that comes from mental overload. Another first for him.

★★★

The next morning Arya woke to see Amber standing over her with a cup of orange juice and a donut in her hands. A look of concern covered her face. Arya grinned as she accepted the powdered jelly and let out a moan of delight when she discovered it was her favorite flavor, raspberry.

"Thank you so much, Amber!" Arya gushed after she finished the donut in record time. "I'm starved."

"I am so, so sorry I let him take you!" Amber blurted out, her face contorted in self-hatred.

Arya put the glass of juice down and pulled Amber close to her, wrapping her friend into a hug. "Let me make this clear, Amber. It was NOT your fault. He's an ancient werewolf alpha," Arya whispered into her friend's ear as she held her tightly. "I do not blame you for a single moment. Please don't blame yourself. I was so worried that he'd hurt you or worse… I'm just glad you're okay!"

Amber's steely reserve broke and she began to sob into Arya's shoulders. After a moment, she pulled away and wiped her eyes and cheeks, smiling insecurely.

"Thank you for not hating me," she finally said, straightening her shirt.

Arya picked up her juice, finishing it quickly before standing up and walking over to Caliope. Caliope was sitting on her bed watching the scene

unfold with a small grin on her face.

"She was really worried about that," Caliope said, climbing off the bed as the girls approached. "I'm so glad we're all okay!" The three girls embraced.

"Thank you for coming to save me," Arya said, looking from one friend to the other. "I don't know what I did to deserve such amazing friends so quickly."

"You'd have done it for us," Caliope replied.

She put her arms around both Arya and Amber, leading them from the hospital wing to the Main Hall. The girls walked side by side, taking up the width of the corridor, forcing other students to squeeze against the wall to allow them to pass.

A few students shot them dirty looks but most recognized Arya and were quick to avoid her gaze, acting almost as if they were afraid of her. Arya was too preoccupied to notice, however, and squealed in joy the moment they entered the grand foyer. Letting her friends go, she ran to the corner of the room where her best friend in the world was standing next to her mother, Andrea Hernandez.

"LATOYA?!" she screamed, beaming as she enveloped her friend into a hug. Latoya stumbled, laughing.

"Girl, I am so happy to see you!" Latoya replied, grinning. "My mom said you'd be here, but I don't really know what to believe anymore!"

Latoya side-eyed her mother and Andrea Hernandez sighed, irritated, turning away from the girls to focus on Madame Dupont instead.

"I had no idea you'd be here, but I am so, so glad! You'll never believe the last month of my life!!" Arya laughed, tears filling her eyes. Squeezing them shut and taking a deep breath, Arya could feel the magic on her skin recede until it seemed to rest inside as she calmed herself. She'd used her confinement to practice meditating and she was relieved to see it was working.

"Are we roomies?" Latoya asked, mostly to her mother and Madame Dupont, who looked surprised and worried.

"The Princess is already in a double suite, but if she wishes, we can move room assignments. Although, I have Miss Hernandez assigned with her cousin, Miss Steward," Madame Dupont looked at Arya for guidance, causing her to blush.

“It’s all good,” Latoya replied, throwing her arm around Arya. “I’d like to hang with Surya.”

“Very well,” Madame Dupont sighed with relief and led the small group toward the Girl Dormitories. She launched into her standard introduction Arya had heard before so Arya whispered for Latoya to meet her in the Main Hall after the tour.

“I’m starved,” she said, leaving the group as Latoya and her mother headed up the stairs behind the Headmistress. She ran into the dining hall and spotted her brother with her friends from across the room. Hurrying over to them, she was grabbed from behind at the waist. Spinning around, she laughed with joy as she realized her little brother was hugging her. “Cliff! I missed you,” she said, bending down to hug him tightly.

“I was so scared, Arya,” he said, his voice soft and sad. “I didn’t know if you’d come home!”

Arya stared into his dark brown eyes and placed her hands on both sides of his head. “I promise you, Cliff, I will always come home.”

“I missed you!” Cliff let out a cry of relief and hugged her around the neck, choking her slightly.

Coughing as he let go, she laughed. “Let’s have a family dinner tonight.”

“Okay!” Cliff said, hugging her once more quickly before running off to join his friends for breakfast.

“Cute kid,” a voice from behind said. Arya’s heart sped up as she turned to see Surya. Although she’d fought for the girl to have a second chance, she knew better than to trust her overnight.

“Yea, he is,” she said, her voice cold and distant. “Stay away from him.” Arya turned without waiting for a reply and walked away, leaving Surya standing in the middle of the crowded dining hall alone. Reaching the table where Xavier was sitting with their friends, glaring at Surya, she sighed. “Ignore her, Xavy.”

“I don’t understand why you fought for her to come here,” he retorted, bitterly. “I don’t think you fully grasp what a stupid move that was.”

He didn’t take his eyes off of Surya as he spoke, his normal dark eyes were tinged crimson, filled with rage. Arya looked at her brother’s tired face and sighed. She felt terrible that he had been so worried for her but she also knew she was doing the right thing, although she wasn’t sure why herself.

“I don’t know… I believe she didn’t want to hurt me… I mean, I don’t know… She was nice to me and always apologized for everything they did… I don’t know, I just feel like she didn’t want to be there as much as me.” Arya fought the urge to look over her shoulder at Surya and instead focused on the breakfast that appeared in front of her.

“You can be such an idiot sometimes,” Xavier replied, yawning.

Arya looked up, frowning. She put her fork down, staring her brother down. “Don’t call me an idiot, Xavier,” she growled. “I have had just about enough of my brothers and their anger issues. You have no idea what I went through and you are seriously going to sit here and call me an idiot? Screw you!”

The electric power flowed through her as her anger flared. With a sudden explosion of energy, her wings burst from her back, revealing their magnificent, nearly glowing divinity.

Gasps of students around her were deafening as she fought to pull them back inside. In a rather awkward display, one wing disappeared before the other. She flushed at her friends’ shocked faces. Although they’d seen her the night before, they hadn’t really taken in the opulent, grandiose and impressive nature of their friend.

“Woah,” Xavier said after a few moments of stunned silence passed. “You’re an angel, Ya.”

Mumbling around the table caused Arya’s cheeks to flush. “It happened last night. During the battle,” she replied, shaking her head. “Mom made me do a spell to reveal my true nature. It saved me.”

“You’re more than a witch or a Nephilim,” Amber explained. “You both are. In truth, I am surprised your mother didn’t invoke your true nature when you ascended.”

Arya picked up her fork, stabbed her food and took a bite. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re only at half power… or, well, you were, but Xavier still is. Without your true nature being invoked, you’ll never fully master your abilities.”

“Think about it,” Xavier snorted. “She wanted you to outshine me. Give you a moment in the sun before my True Nature proves I am the heir.”

Arya gasped at her brother, surprised by his jealousy. He’d never been mean to her for no reason before, not even when they were kids. They’d

always been Team Twinning but she suddenly felt this vast distance between them.

"Tell me the spell, Arya."

"I don't remember," she replied, finally touching her breakfast after she felt the eyes of her fellow students leave her.

Xavier looked at her with disbelief. "What?"

"There was so much going on. I don't remember what she said to say. I just said it."

"Besides, she probably invoked the full moon and the aether that Baan had already created," Amber explained. "It would make the words themselves meaningless without both elements."

Arya glanced at her friend gratefully. Just then the Lastrange sisters walked up to the table and made seats for themselves between the twins, sensing the tension. Their breakfasts appeared and they began to eat. A couple moments of awkward silence passed before one of the sisters broke it.

"Last night was crazy!" Caliope laughed. Her sisters raised their eyebrows simultaneously. "Told you guys we were stronger together."

"Charmed!" Arya laughed softly with her friends.

"You were unconscious half the time, Cali," Clarissa said sarcastically. "We literally channeled you to do that shield."

"Yea, but she's right, Clarissa," Claire argued, defending their sister. "If she wasn't there, we wouldn't have been able to channel our sisterhood. We aren't the same if one of is us missing."

"Alright, alright," laughed Clarissa, throwing a grape at Claire. "I'm just glad we all made it out alive."

"Those other witches weren't so lucky," Amber said solemnly. She looked over to where Surya sat alone, picking at her meal. "I am glad you fought for her, Arya. There was enough loss to our witch's community."

Arya briefly smiled at her friend and finished her breakfast, pushing the plate to the center of the table. Arya shifted uncomfortably in her seat as another tension filled pause stole the moment. "She was kind to me when she didn't need to be."

"Do you think they'll find Baan?" Theo spoke up at last. He'd been unusually silent, but his curiosity finally won out.

“I hope so,” Arya replied. “He is dangerous. In ways we can’t even understand. He waited thousands of years to get revenge and it failed… It not only failed, but we literally killed his daughters in the battle. He’s got more reason than ever to come after us again… so I don’t think he’ll give up any time soon. If we don’t find him, he’ll find us… this much I know.”

Theo sank in his seat. “Wow. Intense.”

She drifted into thought and remembered what Surya said about bringing Aya back. “I need to get a message to our mother, Xavier. How do I do that?”

“Madame Michaels should be able to do that,” Theo answered helpfully. “She’s got different ways of corresponding with the supernatural community outside of the Academy they don’t teach until our final year.”

“Finally someone tells me!” Arya exclaimed. “Thank you!”

Arya wiped her face on a napkin and through it on her plate. Standing up, she waved to her friends and ran to Sabrina Michael’s office as fast as she could. She didn’t notice Surya staring after her in the grand foyer or Latoya coming down from the dorms with her mother and Madame Dupont as she was too focused on finding the one person that might be able to help her send a message to her mother.

★★★

Xavier watched as his twin ran off, glowering at her empty seat. He was angry with her and he didn’t fully understand why himself. He just knew that she’d been in danger and it had nearly destroyed him, and now, she was this incredibly beautiful angel, not just his little sister, not just a witch. He was jealous and he couldn’t explain what it was that made him feel so insecure.

Xavier glared at Surya. “Man, this is stupid. She shouldn’t be here.”

“She’s here to stay, Dude… You gotta let it go,” Theo tried to reason. “Besides, your sister is the one that got hurt. Why are you so mad?”

Xavier sighed again. “I can’t believe my mother is fine with this. Arya was missing and held hostage by that crazy witch.”

“Only because her father made her,” Amber defended the girl to Xavier’s surprise. “You heard Arya. She was nice to her.”

“My sister is naive and has no idea how evil people really are. She never expects the worst from anyone. Ever.” Xavier drank a bit of his coffee and slammed the cup down, spilling some of the contents onto the table. “I’ve always had to protect her. First from the bullies in our mortal school. Now here. I won’t let some big bad wolf hurt my sister and get away with it!”

Getting up, he shoved his chair into the table and walked out of the Main Hall. Not looking where he was walking, he ran right into Madame Dupont, who let out a stifled scream as she somehow kept from falling.

“Master Morningstar, you really must watch where you are walking. One demerit!” She admonished him.

He glowered. “Sorry.”

Her demeanor softened as she sensed his self-defeat. “Just be more careful… I believe you know Miss Hernandez?”

Xavier looked up and the rage he felt broke in an instant as he saw the girl of his dreams, standing there in front of him. He grinned at her. “Latoya? Wow! What are you doing here?

“Well, turns out, this is the academy I was selected to attend,” she replied.

Latoya wore the standard school uniform, but somehow it looked incredible on her. “Where’d Arya go? She ran so fast through here, I didn’t get a chance to really talk to her.”

“No idea. So… witch? wolf? Can’t be an immortal with your mom here. Doctor, as beautiful as ever, by the way,” Xavier turned on his usual flirtatious charm and flattered Dr. Hernandez like he normally did when she was around.

Latoya laughed and rolled her eyes, ignoring his efforts like always.

“Xavier, how nice to see you!” Dr. Hernandez chucked. “And we are witches. Although, that’s really quite personal and impolite to ask. Hasn’t anyone taught you this yet?”

Xavier shook his head and pretended to look ashamed, winking at Latoya. She responded to his flirting by rolling her eyes, sighing and shaking her head in mock disbelief.

Latoya’s mom patted Xavier on the arm. “Tell your mother, we miss her at Peak’s Memorial and hope she’ll return soon, Xavier.”

“Of course, Dr. Hernandez,” Xavier said, momentarily forgetting the past several days as he was left alone with Latoya.

Andrea Hernandez and Madame Dupont walked toward the entrance to the Academy, talking amongst themselves.

“You look amazing in the uniform, Latoya,” Xavier said in a clumsy attempt at flirting with Latoya. He whistled. “Like, I mean, wow.”

“Boy, when will you quit it?” Latoya quipped.

Xavier forced a laugh and shrugged. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

Latoya glanced toward her mother, sighing again. “So, the school seems pretty cool. What’s the buzz?” Latoya said, hoping to change the subject.

Thankfully, Xavier indulged her. “Well, the teachers are really good. Even I’m learning something here,” he joked. “You wouldn’t believe it. People think I’m the smart twin.”

“Wow, impressive institution in that case,” Latoya giggled genuinely for the first time. “If they can teach you, I should do great!”

“Yea, and we’ve made some good friends here. You have to meet the Lastrange sisters. They are identical triplets, but they’re all so different from each other, and yet weirdly the same. They actually draw on their bonds as sisters to do magic.”

“That’s really cool,” Latoya replied, nodding. “I definitely want to meet them. Who’s the best teacher?”

“I like Madoc. He’s teaching me how to hone my power.”

Latoya cocked her eyebrow in curiosity. “Power? Oh what power would that be, golden boy?”

Xavier grinned sheepishly and shook his head. “Not important. So, what’d I miss?”

“Oh the guys miss you, but Brian swears you come and hang out at night once a week. Luke is a little off. I think he broke up with that boy from Denver, but he won’t talk to me as you know.”

Xavier scoffed thinking about how weird Luke got around girls, almost as if he was repelled by them but he shrugged. “Yea, they did. Brian mentioned it, last week. I’m hoping to get home next break, but I don’t know… things have been… crazy.”

Latoya lightly touched his arm. Her eyes warm with concern. “Want to talk about it?”

Xavier's heart raced. He couldn't help but wish she'd see him as more than her best friend's brother for the millionth time. "Nah, I'm good. I missed you though." His voice was husky and cautious.

Latoya smiled, casting her eyes down, shrugging. "Yea, I guess we missed you too," she said as casually as she could.

"No. I mean, I missed you, Toya. You gotta know by now what I think of you. You're pretty amazing and anyone'd be lucky to have you as their girlfriend," Xavier whispered hopefully.

Latoya sighed, shifting on her feet, avoiding eye contact. "Don't do this, Xavy."

"Please, I've gotta shoot my shot." He said, stepping forward slightly.

She backed away and put her hand out, finally looking him in the eyes. "Well, for your own sake, give it a rest," she replied gently. "I don't like you like that and I am not interested in having a relationship with anyone… especially not the brother of my best friend."

"We don't have to have a relationship," he whispered hopefully. "Just spend some time together. bBe friends without Arya."

"I don't have any interest in spending time with someone that wants to kiss me." Latoya sounded frustrated.

Xavier nodded and dropped his head, his anger returning but he sighed deeply and restrained himself as he apologized. "Sorry, I know I should stop. I will stop. I won't bother you again."

Latoya smiled at him and punched his shoulder lightly. "Thanks, Xavier, really. I just don't have any interest… in anybody… in any way… So any chance you've seen my cousin? Her name is Surya? I heard she just transferred in!"

Xavier had forgotten that Surya was Latoya's cousin, information he'd learned the night before in a stream of overwhelming events. His restraint broke. His rage burst from him as his eyes turned a deep crimson and black. "She's really your cousin? Do you know what she did to my sister?"

Latoya looked shocked at his outburst and backed away, suddenly afraid of him. "Woah. Calm down, Xavier… What are you even talking about?" she asked. "Of course she's my cousin. Her mother and my father are brother and sister. I don't understand what…"

"Wow, so she was honest about one thing. Doesn't mean she isn't evil." Xavier sounded so unlike himself that Latoya almost didn't recognize

the dejected boy in front of her as the brotherly friend from her childhood.

"You said she did something to Arya? What did she do?" Latoya asked, her voice shaking.

Xavier sneered at her, scoffing before he answered. He folded his arms across his chest. "Oh, she only helped kidnap and hold my sister hostage for over a week . Oh and then she had the audacity to act like she was the victim!" His voice grew loud and filled with fury.

Latoya was not one to be yelled at by anyone, let alone by a friend. Putting one hand up in front of his face and her other on her hip, she channeled all her confidence and strength. Latoya stood resolved against this angry son of Satan, unwilling to relent to his anger and show him her fear.

"Boy, you better not be blaming me for something I didn't do and don't you dare yell at me!"

Xavier turned away from her, still cross but ashamed. He could feel the heat of his magic-filled-fury threatening to boil over in the grand foyer. "Sorry. I gotta go."

"What is wrong with you, Xavier?" Latoya asked softly. Her voice was filled with compassion. She reached for his shoulder, barely touching him with the tips of her fingers. "What happened to you?"

"It's nothing. I'm fine!" He growled at her, his tone animalistic. He seemed to grow taller the angrier he got.

Latoya backed away slowly. "No, Xavy, you aren't. And until you are, stay away from me. Stay away from Arya and stay away from my cousin. You aren't right, not right now, and you need to fix yourself."

He could hear the empathy in her voice as she turned away and his heart cracked. Pain filling him as his mind became murky. He watched as she walked way, down the same corridor that Arya'd run before. Not really thinking, he found himself walking up the spiral staircase in the Southernmost tower in search of Madoc Weatherly.

★★★

"Madame Michaels, I need your help," Arya said, bursting into her office without so much as a knock. Sabrina looked up from her desk, startled,

before glancing down and grimacing. She'd spilled her coffee on the paper she was writing.

"I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to mess you up!"

Sabrina tisked but said nothing, waving her hand in a motion for Arya to take a seat. She blotted the paper in front of her, muttering something about any other student.

"I'm sorry, really."

"It's fine, Princess," Sabrina said in her normal cheery voice. "What can I do you for?"

"I need to get a message to my mother. Can you help me?" Arya asked, her voice steady and calm. Authority always terrified Arya, but surviving something she never thought she would allowed her small fears to fall away.

"I can certainly try!" Sabrina replied happily.

Arya inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, smiling at the witch with bedhead. She was wearing a lumpy, pink sweater that was a favorite based on how worn the elbows were. Arya was beginning to suspect that her time away from the Academy might have been just as bad for everyone else as her kidnapping had been for her.

"Thank you, Madame Michaels. For everything. I'm sorry for whatever it is that my father did when I was gone," Arya said seriously. "I can't imagine he was easy to deal with, what with him being the king of Hell and all."

"Yes, well," Sabrina began, "you shouldn't concern yourself. You had your own ordeal and none of us would ever blame you."

"Still, I'm sorry, but thanks," Arya tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "About that message… I need my mother to know that Baan was trying to bring Aya to him through me. He's looking for Aya…the best way to find him is to track him tracking her."

"However do you mean?" Sabrina sounded pleasant but uncommitted.

"He's still angry at Aya after all these years… the whole reason he kidnapped me is because he could use my body to steal her soul or something. Anyways, it won't work now because I'm truly Ascended but… what if he's still trying to find her? Still trying to get his revenge on her? He'd have to find another way to find her, right? Some magical way?"

“Oh, my! Well, isn’t that something? Alright, just a moment! Just a moment,” she repeated as she shuffled through her desk to find a piece of parchment and her pen. Scribbling quickly onto the thick paper and rolling it up, whispering something over the paper. Just as she was about to stick the small scroll in a candle flame, Sabrina reached for Arya’s hand.

“I need to channel you, my dear. Easiest to connect with a blood relative of the witch you’re seeking, especially one that she’d welcome a message from.”

“Right,” Arya replied, taking the witch’s hand. “Do I have to say something? Or do something?”

“No, no. Just allow me to channel your magic and bloodline. Please stay quiet so I can focus on your mother, dear.”

Sabrina used her other hand and picked up an athame from an open drawer beside her, gripping Arya’s hand tightly. She closed her eyes and began to mutter under her breath as she cut the palm of Arya’s hand, drawing blood. Bringing the blood-dipped athame to the flame, Sabrina then placed the scroll into the flame, continuing her incantation almost silently. Arya felt the stir of her magic being drawn out of her. No, through her and into Madame Michaels. Within a moment, the scroll burned and older witch let go of Arya.

“There. She’s received your message, Princess.”

“Just like that?” she asked surprised. Her hand had already begun to heal from the cut and she used it to tuck the same loose curl behind her ear again.

“Yep, just like that! It looks simple and it is,” explained Sabrina, “but it does take practice. I once sent a message to the wrong person and caused all kinds of trouble!” She shuddered at the memory. “Needless to say, that’s why communication spells are reserved for the final year of your schooling, Princess.”

Arya nodded and looked around. “Do you have a book on the aether, Madame Michaels?”

It was Sabrina’s turn to look surprised. “Why ever would you want a book about that?” she inquired, evenly tempered.

“Well,” Arya said in her sickly sweet voice. “Baan, my ancient werewolf brother, tried to sacrifice me in a weird friggin ritual. And it just

happened to use the aether as the symbol for the ritual, which also helped me ascend to my true nature… and I'd like to know why."

Sabrina sat back in silence, her eyes narrowing but she nodded with a tight smile on her face. Sabrina spoke in a formal, unhappy tone. "Very well. I'll find you the books you need and have them sent to your dormitory, Your Highness. Is there anything else?"

While she felt a brief pang of guilt, Arya wasn't worried about that. She needed to know what exactly Baan had tried to do to her. "No, thank you, Madame Michaels," she said standing up and heading for the door. "Oh, wait. My new schedule. I no longer have Mortal Studies and don't know where I am supposed to go."

"Oh, right." The older witch shuffled through her papers and with a satisfied grunt, pulled out the one she was looking for. "Here you are. Supernatural Creatures with Master Bloodmaker at the stables. Enjoy."

★★★

Xavier found Madoc Weatherly's office unusually empty. The books he'd left out were back where they belonged and Madoc's normally cluttered desk was empty, cleaned off. The shelves were dusted and the floors were swept. Dirty dishes that had been there since Xavier's arrival were absent and randomly discarded sweaters missing. Looking around, he called out for the warlock to no avail. Sighing in confusion, he left the office and walked up the spiral staircase leading to the portal room, where he found the warlock. Madoc was sitting slumped on the floor with his knit cap on the ground next to him. He was stroking the black cat from the night before. His beard, normally a bright display of color was a muted grey and his face was filled with pain. Xavier leaned against the wall near him and slid down until he was sitting next to his mentor.

"You alright, Madoc?" Xavier asked, mildly grateful for the distraction from his own anger.

The warlock gasped and jumped, surprised to see Xavier sitting there. "What are you doing here?" The warlock whispered, his eyes darting around the room. "I was alone."

"Yea, until just now… What's going on?" Xavier tried again.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” the warlock whispered. “Too dangerous. Bad idea.”

“So quit,” Xavier suggested.

Madoc shook his head vigorously. “No, no, no… Can’t leave. Can’t quit. On pain of death.”

Xavier realized that Lucifer must have threatened him at some point. “Okay, so you can’t quit… So how about we go down to your office and you can help me figure out what spell my sister performed to get her angel wings?” Xavier was tired of being patient with everyone else, but he strained to keep his voice calm and soothing.

Madoc peered at him and grinned. “A mystery! I love those!”

Madoc’s beard changed to a deep blue as he picked up his cap and shoved it back onto his head. Jumping up as if he hadn’t just been wallowing in his sadness, the warlock seemed renewed and ready to take on the day.

“Yea, a real mystery."

“Let’s go, dear boy! Don’t hesitate! Not a moment to waste!”

Xavier made a face but got up and followed the man he knew would help him solve the puzzle, if he could tolerate his eccentricities long enough. No easy task, thought Xavier as he reentered Madoc’s office.

“So where do we start?” Xavier asked after a moment of watching Madoc dance around his room, picking books out of the shelf.

“We start with what we know, dear boy! Of course! What do we know?” He froze, dropping the books in his arms onto the floor with a loud crash. The warlock stared off into space for a moment. Then he beamed, picking his books up and carrying them to the desk. “We know she was in the aether and we know she is Nephilim… what else? Help me, my boy!”

“It was a full moon and she said it was a spell to reveal her true self… if that makes sense.”

“True self… Hmmm… tricky…” The warlock levitated to an upper shelf as he stroked his beard. “Very tricky, indeedy.”

“Can I help?” Xavier asked after several moments of silence with the warlock standing midair, studying his shelves.

“Oh. No. You just practice your projecting, young Sir,” his teacher replied, tossing a book Xavier read the night before down to him. Then he proceeded to ignore the teen.

Frustrated, Xavier picked up the book, sat on the couch and leaned back, closing his eyes. He tried to stay focused on projecting himself to Luke's, wanting to help his friend, but his mind continued to be drawn back to Baan. With every thought of the werewolf king, Xavier's resentment was stoked. He pictured the tall, dark man in his mind and his rage flared. Suddenly, Xavier was standing in a room he didn't recognize.

"Woah," he whispered as he stabilized his projection. He heard a noise from behind him and he turned to see Baan sitting alone at a table, reading a book. Remembering to keep his projection in the shadows to avoid detection, he tilted his head and strained his neck to see what was on the page in front of his half-brother, but he couldn't see.

"How was she able to highjack my ritual?" Baan muttered to himself, unaware he was being watched. Baan flipped the page and growled with dissatisfaction. "I planned this for a millennia… there must be a way."

Xavier tried to move closer but felt uneasy. He had no idea if he was visible to Baan and he didn't know if Baan would hear him if he got too close so he made small, soft steps, sneaking closer, inch by inch. Baan was still muttering to himself about his failed plan and Arya's ability to thwart him, despite all his precautions.

"Must be that Archangel blood… What can fight it? Greater demon blood? Demons don't have physical form on this plane… I'd have to find an infected human…" Baan muttered, turning the page again.

Xavier managed to get close enough that he could strain and see the page in front of Baan, to no avail. The entire page was covered in hieroglyphs that Xavier couldn't begin to read.

"Come closer, Little Brother. I won't bite," Baan said suddenly.

Xavier gasped, jumping. His fear broke his concentration and almost fell back into his body. Not ready to give up, he focused again and found himself back in the room with Baan.

Baan sat on a leather chair, drinking a small glass of something brown."If you weren't a projection, little Brother, I would offer you a drink. Perhaps you'd be willing to join me here."

"Not on your life," Xavier protested.

"Such finality. For what? In defense of your rival?"

Xavier's projection flickered but he focused and found his hold. "My sister is not my rival."

“Oh, but she is. Two exist yet only one may have the throne.”

“Yea, that might be true if I actually wanted it, but I don’t. I don’t want anything to do with Lucifer’s Kingdom.”

“Oh, but he wants back into my father’s father’s… You… or your sister,” Baan sneered, “are the key.”

“The key? The key to what?” Xavier shook his head and stepped closer to where Baan sat.

“To getting into the Kingdom of Heaven, little Brother.” He sounded almost annoyed that Xavier hadn’t figured it out on his own. “I could have made it you, if only you had let your sister go without a fight. Both our rivals would be dead by now.”

“She’s not my rival.”

“Of course she is. And Aya is mine. She ran me from my mother and home as a child and ripped away my father’s love. Just as Arya will do to you. She’s a doppelgänger of a doppelgänger. She has no true soul.”

“You sound insane.”

“Oh, little Brother! How you wound me,” Baan mocked. “I have lived your life. Do not forget. I was once a mortal boy who wanted nothing more than to marry the mortal girl from my village. She was a beauty. Did you know Aya killed her the very night we ascended?”

Xavier didn’t know what to say or do so he simply stood quietly, waiting for Baan to make some sense.

“Aya was a vindictive girl, prone to fits of melancholy as a child. She created beautiful things just to destroy them and mock our despair. My mother… our mother… she poured love and adoration over Aya in hopes of making her sweeter, I think, but Aya was never sweet.”

“So your sister was a psychopath. Mine isn’t,” Xavier replied at last.

“A psychopath? Is that one of those mortal words to define someone born of evil? Like our mother?”

“Our mother isn’t evil,” Xavier defended. “I’m sorry you got dealt a bad hand, man, but this really isn’t my fault and it definitely isn’t Arya’s. She’s not my rival and we’re not your enemy. You attacked us.”

Baan said nothing for a moment and finished his drink, placing the glass on the table with a clink. “It doesn’t matter. It won’t work again.”

“Why not?”

“She’s no longer just a doppelgänger. Do they teach nothing at that academy of Lucifer’s?” Baan stood up and took a step forward to face his brother’s projection. “But you, you are still unfinished… incomplete. Weak.”

Xavier was grateful in that moment he couldn’t feel Baan’s breath on his cheek. “I’m not weak.”

Baan laughed coldly and walked through his projection, startling Xavier out of focus, causing his soul to jump back into his body. Opening his eyes, Xavier gasped.

“Are you alright, my boy?” Madoc drifted down from where he’d been levitating and sat next to Xavier on the sofa.

“I saw my brother… I didn’t mean to but it happened. And he saw me.”

“The werewolf king? I thought you practiced projecting to your mortal friends, my boy. This is very dangerous. Very, very dangerous.”

“I didn’t mean to but… Madoc, I think I know why he did what he did… and he’s not done. Before he saw me, he said something…” Xavier racked his brain trying to remember what it was that Baan had been doing. “He was looking at a book of hieroglyphs and he said something about Arya having archangel blood and needing an infected human of a demon or something…”

“Oh! My! What kind of hieroglyphs? Demonic, Angelic, Nordic, Egyptian, Sumerian?” Xavier shook his head.

“I don’t know… I couldn’t tell, but he did say he needed greater demon blood.”

“Greater demon blood? Oh, dear. That’s not good, not good at all… terribly difficult to obtain… you’d need to summon a Greater Demon and offer it a living human host… it would require a certain kind of human…”

Madoc trailed off, floating back to the top of his bookshelves. He drummed his fingers along the spines until he found the volume he was looking for. Floating back down, he handed the book to Xavier. “This should help you understand. Let me know if you have any questions later, of course, but you better run, my boy… You’re late to your next class.”

Xavier glanced at the clock and realized he was not only late but had nearly missed the whole thing. “It’s too late now,” he sighed, sitting on the

couch. He opened the book. “There’s only ten minutes left. Might as well stay here and start figuring this out.”

“Well, now… I just…” Madoc Weatherly snatched his cap off his head and twisted in his hands. “I suppose you are the prince… Okay, my boy, you may stay. Shall I get snacks?”

Xavier chuckled as the warlock made a list in the air of his favorite foods and sent the words flying through the air, out the door and down the stairs, presumably to the kitchens where the head chef, Greywolf Gingerman, would create the dishes requested.

“Greater demons are rare. Most have been vanquished in the last two hundred years,” Madoc pondered.

Xavier looked up, an idea occurring to him. “The last two hundred years? Since the academies were formed?”

Madoc peered at Xavier curiously and nodded.

“So Lucifer founded the very places that trained the witches that vanquished his greater demons?”

“Well, yes.” Madoc began to pet his beard, which was now changing color with every stroke. “My boy, I think you may have discovered something.”

“But what? It doesn’t make sense that Lucifer would want his Demons destroyed? Like why would he do all this and sacrifice so much?” Xavier asked, just as Madame Dupont knocked on the door to Madoc’s office and walked in.

“Ah, Master Morningstar! I have been looking for you,” she said, tapping her high heeled shoe on the stone floor.

Chapter Thirteen

Arya was late to the stables for her Supernatural Creatures Studies. When she arrived, she saw her friends, Baku, Leloni and Jimmy, huddled together, whispering. Arryn Bloodmaker was later than Arya but when he arrived, he still refused to make eye contact with her. Instead focused on Baku and Jimmy, leaving Leloni to wander over to Arya with a questioning look on her face.

"What's going on with him?" Leloni asked Arya. She shrugged in response. Since the hospital wing, he had been giving her the cold shoulder and she wasn't sure why. "I'm glad you're safe."

"Oh, thanks. Yea, I'm fine," Arya mumbled, watching as Arryn showed Baku and Jimmy how to feed the unicorns. Sighing to herself, she went to where her pegasus was supposed to be. "Persephone?" she whispered to the empty stall.

"I don't think she's been back yet, but I think Master Bloodmaker probably knows how to lure her home," Leloni said, hopefully. "By the way, he wants us to muck the empty stalls today. The boys get the chore of having to chase the hippogriffs around."

"Okay, I'll start in here," she replied.

Arya went to the storage closet where they kept the mucking shovels while Leloni went outside for the wheelbarrow to scoop it into. Arya fought

back tears as she realized how much she missed Persephone, her beautiful pegasus that saved her life. Leloni rolled the wheelbarrow between two stalls, the one Arya was in and one to the left. Arya handed her a shovel and moved into the stall, scooping and dumping in silence. It lasted only a few moments before Leloni spoke, unable to help her impulsivity in check.

"It was crazy with you gone. The wolves stopped talking to the witches. People actually broke up over it. So much drama," Leloni gossiped. Arya made a small grunting noise to show she was listening but didn't comment. "Like, I thought my ohana was chaos on the island but… man, your family makes mine seem so normal."

"Thanks," Arya said bitterly. She continued to muck Persephone's stall and suppress her magic that was tingling inside her. "I really needed to hear that right now."

"Sorry, sorry! I've got a big mouth, always have. Just honest thoughts, you know. Honest heart, clear mind?" Leloni looked mildly embarrassed and went back to the task of mucking the stall nearby. A few moments passed before she ducked her head in again.

"So, I know, I know, big mouth. None of my business, and whatever but did your brother really kidnap you?" she asked, leaning against the outside wall of the stall, peeking in at Arya. "It's the talk of the school, you know."

"This is ridiculous," Arya grumbled under her breath, annoyed. "Does this school have nothing better to talk about than my family?"

"Well, you are the royal family… Kind of makes you the center of attention, even if…" Leloni paused, pulling her long, black hair into a messy bun. "Anyways, so did he?"

Arya shook her head and sighed, placing the shovel in the full wheelbarrow and left the stall to dump it. "I don't want to talk about it." She walked away from Leloni, who followed undeterred. Arya closed her eyes and pushed the barrow forward, trying to ignore her.

"I get that… It's just, I thought we were friends but then I wasn't even one of the people there to help save you… and I feel like I was totally excluded from everything. Like you all had some big bonding party without me," she said jokingly.

Arya stopped, put the wheelbarrow down and turned to look at her friend. Arya couldn't keep the irritation out of her voice or the distain off

her face. “Seriously? I was fighting for my life and you think it was a party? If you think that, then we really aren’t friends.”

Arya then turned away, picking up the wheelbarrow and walking out of the barn at a quicker pace.

Outside, Jimmy and Baku were in the dome pens with the hippogriffs, attempting to lunge them like they’d been taught but hippogriffs are unlike equine supernaturals and tend to get distracted too easily due to their bird brains. Arya dumped the contents of the wheelbarrow in a giant pile near the tree-line and slowly walked back, watching the two boys struggle with a smile on her face. Just then she heard a pop nearby. The familiar whine of Persephone caused Arya to drop the wheelbarrow and go running to her pegasus.

“You’re home!” She hugged the large neck of the creature, burying her nose and closing her eyes to better appreciate the horse smell. It helped to heal a part of her soul. Persephone neighed and pawed the ground with her right hoof. She flapped her wings and whipped her tail in excitement. “I missed you too, my beautiful girl.”

Seeing a lead rope on a nearby fence, Arya sprinted over and brought it back quickly, wrapping it around her equine’s throat. She lead her pegasus to the barn. Arryn was staring at her with a confused, irritated expression on his face. She waved and smiled but he turned away. He went back into the barn, disappearing from sight before she arrived.

Putting Persephone back in her stall, Arya loaded up her feed bucket with hay and alfalfa. She added a bowl of grains mixed with beet pulp to spoil her a little and as a way to apologize for being gone so long. She then began to brush her familiar out as Persephone ate. The bell signaling the end of class rang but Arya ignored it, focusing on her mare. She relished the quiet of the barn when the others left.

Arryn Bloodmaker finally emerged from his office when the bell tolled for the beginning of the next class rang. Checking on all the creatures, he was startled to see Arya still in Persephone’s stall, brushing her and leaning against the beautiful pegasus.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he barked.

Arya jumped and Persephone pinned her ears back and nickered at him. “I don’t want to go to my next class.”

“Not my problem, Princess,” he said filling the word with disgust. “You’re not supposed to be here,” he repeated. His voice quivered with emotion.

Arya scoffed and finally turned to face him. “Why are you suddenly so hateful to me?”

He shook his head and threw his hands up, backing away. “You tell me!” Arryn’s face turned pink as he grew afraid. “You attacked me!”

Arya gasped and backed down. “What? No! No I didn’t. I couldn’t have. I just got back last night!”

“Then who did? She was wearing your face. She acted like you!” Arryn argued.

Arya’s mouth opened but no words came out. She knew who attacked the stable master and it was her fault. “I think… I think it was my sister Aya,” she whispered, hanging her head in shame. “I am so sorry, Arryn. I didn’t mean for this to happen to you.”

“Your sister? The vampire queen?” He laughed humorlessly. “You’ve got to be full of something I have enough of around here.”

“No, she’s my doppelgänger. That’s why Baan wanted me. No one has seen her in centuries. He wanted to kill her but she was here…” Arya’s face became one of concentration, connecting the dots. “Something doesn’t make sense but I don’t know what it is.”

“Um, would that be why she attacked me?” Arryn demanded. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I mean, why in the Holy Hell would she attack the Stables? It’s ridiculous.”

“More ridiculous than the idea that I attacked you?” She rolled her eyes and sighed, racking her brain on why her evil sister would be here. “Just tell me… was Persephone here when she came?”

Arryn thought a moment before answering. “No, she was out with Master Morningstar, looking for you.” Arya’s dream briefly flashed in her mind and she was suddenly filled with relief.

“I think she was here to kill my familiar,” she whispered. “I’m sorry you were hurt, Master Bloodmaker. It’s my fault.”

“Yes… It is your fault, isn’t it, My Darling Sister?” A familiar voice like poisonous nectar called from behind the two. They jumped and turned to see Arya’s doppelgänger in the flesh, the vampire queen in all her glory.

Their shared red hair was longer and redder on Aya, and Arya's eyes were a deeper green while Aya's were lighter.

"You," Arryn said, backing away from the two sisters.

Aya smiled sinisterly and giggled, throwing her hands up. She took a few steps closer to Arya. ""Me."

"Princess Morningstar, you must leave," Arryn said, waving her closer to him.

Arya shook her head. "I can't."

"No, you should leave, stable boy," Aya turned her cold gaze on the stable master. The young man shivered involuntarily.

Arya nodded and motioned for him to leave. "You should go, Arryn. Find my brothers. Keep them away from here."

Arryn Bloodmaker gave a final look to Aya before nodding and running out the back entrance to the barn.

"What do you want, Aya?" She attempted to keep the fear out of her voice and act as if she was bored, which just seemed to amuse her psychotic sister.

"I want to make a truce with you. Give us both what we want… you the Kingdom of Hell and me, a world without that dirty mutt." Aya cocked her head to the side and reached her hand into a stall with a pink unicorn, who backed away from her, bucking in his closed space, hitting the walls with his hooves. Aya glared at the unicorn but seemed to brush it off rather quickly, turning back to Arya with a cheerful smile. "What do you say?"

"I get you wanting Baan dead after he just tried to kill us but what did Xavier do to you?" Arya asked, hoping her voice was neutral as possible.

"He's keeping you from your destiny," Aya said, seemingly sincerely. "You should be the Queen of Hell… Together we could rule the domains of the living and dead as sisters."

"It's an honor I can do without," Arya replied as calmly as she could. "I'd rather Xavier have the throne so I can pursue my actual dreams."

Aya laughed as if that was the most delightful thing she'd heard in ages."Oh my! What an adorable thing. So young, so dumb."

Arya felt her magic begin to grow within her as she bottled her rage deep inside. "I'm not dumb."

"You are if you think this is just about you, darling Sister."

“No, it’s about you, Aya. Baan’s kidnapping of me was about you. Our mother deciding to marry and have more children was because you destroyed her family.”

Aya giggled, her eyes sparkling with joy. “Twice.”

“What? Twice?”

Arya’s surprise caused Aya to giggle again. “Oh yes. Did she ever tell you about that Viking she met and married?”

“Yea?” Arya nodded.

“Well, he was not himself when he murdered his own children…”

“You made him do it?” Arya asked, knowing the answer. Aya didn’t reply, but her eyes danced and she laughed once more. “Why would you do that?”

Aya’s amusement vanished in a blink of an eye. She took a few steps closer to Arya who stood frozen in place. “Mother loved them… Much more than she loved Baan and more than she loved me.”

“She loved you until you broke her family,” Arya said, anger seeping into her words. Her magic burned inside of her body as she restrained herself. “You should leave.”

“Oh, I will… but, first, I want you to know that I will be back. I’ve been watching you and your brother for longer than you can know, and I will get what I want.”

Arya became confused. “What do you want?”

“Weren’t you listening?” Aya said, taking another step. Arya tried not to gag at the copper scented breath on her cheek. “I want you to be queen.”

Arya opened her mouth to protest, but before she could, the vampire queen was gone from sight. Arryn Bloodmaker returned a moment later with Madame Michaels at his heels. Arya let out a small cry, falling to the floor. Her wings exploding from her back as she released her breath. Arryn and Sabrina hesitated, staring at the grieving nephilim on the floor in front of them.

★★★

Madame Dupont lead Xavier, followed by Madoc Weatherly, to her office in the northwest tower in total silence, where she pointed to a chair and said nothing. Unlike Madoc’s usual messy office, this was immaculate. The

books were organized on labeled shelves and various knickknacks decorated the extra space without looking cluttered. Her mahogany desk was clear of loose papers but a crystal ball and candles were on one corner. There was a small fireplace near a deep velvet lounging chair at the opposite side of the circular room from the desk. Moments later, Arya was brought in with Madame Michaels and Arryn Bloodmaker.

"Good, you're here," Madame Dupont began. "Arryn has told us about Aya's attack on him, and how she was in the stables just now. This is an extraordinary security breech and we must take precautions against it happening again. As you four are the most powerful magical creatures we have at the school presently, you will need to create a new seal that keeps out the werewolf king and vampire queen."

Xavier scoffed.

"How are we supposed to do that?" Arya asked before her brother could.

"I think we should leave here, Ya," Xavier interrupted. "Let's go home. Protect ourselves there. It'll take the target off the academy."

"No, I'm not leaving. Not again," she argued.

Xavier sighed but gave up quickly. "What do we do, Madame Dupont?"

"Madame Michaels, I am sure you can assist Madoc in creating a new seal of protection on the Academy. There is powerful magic in the twins' blood which is why I asked them to join us."

"That's highly unusual," Sabrina said surprised. "Asking a student to donate their blood has never been heard of. We've had other magical students of great power before…"

"What do you need our blood for?" Xavier asked, suspiciously. Arya shifted in her seat Her anxiety fluttered in her stomach as her magic ran hot in her blood. Arya was suddenly filled with mistrust for the ever kind headmistress.

"Your blood is potent magic. Raw and powerful, my boy. It could be used in place of nearly any magical component of a spell and without lunar expectations," Madoc explained, stroking his beard which was now stark white. "It's… risky."

"It's unorthodox is what it is," Sabrina argued. "I cannot believe you'd ask the Morningstar heirs for this…" She gazed at Madame Dupont with

bewildered anger. “Do not offer up your blood willingly, children. Your blood cannot be used against you if you do not give it willingly.”

“This is a bit of an overreaction, don’t you think?” Madame Dupont said calmly, with a small smile on her face. “One of my teachers and several of my students were attacked and I can do nothing to protect them. I thought the Morningstar children would feel… it was their duty to protect their peers, and I knew you’d be able to craft the spell to protect them from the consequences of the magic.”

Arya thought she sounded very reasonable but she still felt nervous and shook her head. “I’m sorry but unless my mother says this is necessary, I won’t give my blood.”

Xavier nodded in agreement. “Yea, me either. No way.”

Madame Dupont took a deep breath through her nose. Her nostrils flared as she smiled warmly at the twins. “Of course, that’s your choice. Madame Michaels and Master Weatherly will still work on a new seal of protection for the school. It’s a matter of utter importance. Dismissed.”

Sabrina nodded, her eyes narrowed. She put a hand on Arya’s upper back and began to push the girl from the room. Arya grabbed her brother’s hand. He was followed by Madoc down the spiral stairs. Sabrina lead the small group to her office and put a finger to her lips.

“Shhh,” she whispered. Lighting candles around the room, she took a bundle of white sage and burned it, mumbling something before nodding to Madoc. “It’s safe to talk now.”

“I think it’s time, Sabrina,” Madoc said cryptically. “We’ve had our suspicions. This simply confirms it.”

“How can we be so sure? She had a very logical answer to the request, even if it was unexpected.”

Arya and Xavier sat in silence, listening to the two adults’ mysterious conversation.

“You were right, Sabrina. You know you were. The risks are too great. We are sworn to Lilith to protect her children, not to the Academy,” Madoc said in an unusually serious voice.

“We could be wrong.”

“We could be, but do you believe that?” He countered.

Sabrina walked to her side of her desk and sat down, shaking her head. “I don’t.”

“Then we tell them.”

“Are you certain, Madoc? Knowledge can be dangerous.”

“Perhaps, but it is also power,” he replied, removing his purple knit cap, revealing messy blue hair. “They deserve power over their own lives.”

Sabrina sat back, staring at Madoc and nodded. “You’re right, of course, Madoc…”

She turned her gaze to the children sitting in front of her, because despite their size, she knew they were children in this Shadow World. She felt a strong urge to protect them.

“Okay, does anyone want to tell us what’s going on?” Xavier was at the end of his patience. “I mean, I really feel like Arya and I need to leave here.”

“It might not be the worst idea, my boy,” Madoc replied dryly. Arya was unnerved by his serious demeanor. She’d never seen him as less than bubbly and eccentric. “Leaving here… it might protect you both from the dark queen.”

Arya’s head shot up in surprise. “You mean, Aya?”

“I’m confused,” Xavier muttered, bitterly.

Sabrina smiled sadly and sighed. “Well, it is our belief that Madame Dupont is a subject of the dark queen, Aya, the original vampire.”

“So, you think Madame Dupont works for Aya?” Arya asked, her voice cracking.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Xavier said exasperated. He leaned back and spread his legs, putting his hands over his face. “Does it ever stop?”

“I don’t think she works for her, Princess,” Madoc explained, rather gently. “I believe Aya sired our headmistress.”

“She’s a vampire?” Xavier sat forward. “Why didn’t we know this?”

“It’s not common knowledge,” Sabrina replied. “Immortals try not to segregate themselves, since they’re already considered unnatural to some of the old school witches.”

“Our mom is immortal and a witch,” Xavier said defiantly. “And we’re… something else. Are we unnatural?”

Sabrina closed her mouth and nodded, smiling softly. “As I said, some of the old school witches do believe that vampires and their offspring are unnatural… But I am not, now or ever, one of those witches, Master

Xavier. But the headmistress is a vampire. She has been here for 200 years, caring for the Academy since it was founded. I wouldn't have fully believed she was a traitor to the academy if she hadn't asked for your blood."

A lull fell over the room, the truth settling on the twins. "Why is our blood so important?" Arya finally asked, breaking the silence. Xavier sat forward and put his hand on his sister's, squeezing it.

"Well, my dear girl," Madoc, placing his knit cap back on his head, replied before taking a deep breath. "With your blood, she could strip you of your immortality and your magic."

The words fell like a bomb and time seemed to stand still for the twins. Arya stifled a cry with her spare hand and exchanged a look of fear with her brother.

"Well… damn," Xavier said, sitting back. "Now what?"

★★★

Not long after learning the truth about the headmistress, Arya and Xavier discovered that Sabrina Michaels and Madoc Weatherly weren't just teachers. The two mentors had served their mother during her pregnancy and were present when the twins were born. Both had taken an oath to protect the twins from any and all harm; to guide them and nurture them if ever Lilith could not. It was obvious to Arya they'd taken their sworn duty seriously and she felt immediately grateful for the witch and warlock. Xavier was relieved to know that he could trust Madoc, since he did already. Leaving the privacy of the sage smoke in Sabrina's office, Arya and Xavier promised not to tell anyone what they'd learned and headed straight for the stables.

Entering the barn, Arya saw Arryn Bloodmaker was busy marking each stall with runes of protection so she grabbed her saddle and tack from the closet while Xavier walked over to him. In hushed tones, he explained they would be leaving for the evening but not to let anyone know they were gone until breakfast. Arryn Bloodmaker nodded and pointed to the hippogriff Xavier usually rode. He was already tacked and ready to ride. Arya spent the next few minutes brushing her pegasus, readying her for their long night.

“Ready, Ya?” Xavier asked, leading his hippogriff past her stall and out the back door of the barn.

“Almost,” she called. She filled her pockets with treats for Persephone and just as she opened the stall gate, Arryn came over, placing a heavy saddlebag over the horn of her saddle.

“Food and drink,” he explained awkwardly.

Arya smiled. She hugged him with one arm while maintaining her grip on her mare. She kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Arryn. I’m sorry for everything my family has put you through.”

Arryn blushed and grunted but did not pull away. He straightened her stirrups. “If you need anything, send her back here and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“I will. Thank you.” Arya nodded and lead Persephone out of the barn with Arryn walking beside them.

“You can teleport together, just take hold of his creature and stand as close together as you can. She’ll take y’all where you need to be.” He paused, gazing into her emerald eyes. Arya’s stomach fluttered. With an earnest expression, he begged her. “Please, be careful, Princess. Take no risks that you can do without.”

A smile flickered on her face as she gave a slight nod of her head. Arryn then held her reins while she mounted her pegasus and settled into the saddle. Persephone nickered and flicked her tail, flapping her wings before adjusting to the feel of the saddle and added weight. Arya nodded and took the reins from the stable master.

“Remember, not a word until morning,” Xavier said, already on his hippogriff and circling at a height of ten feet or so.

Arryn gave a slight bow and let go of Arya’s winged equine, backing away and waving as the two flew over the south woods, leaving the Academy behind them. Landing just outside the Academy’s seal in an empty meadow by a clear pond, they allowed their creatures to rest and dismounted.

“What should we do?” Xavier said, tying his hippogriff to her pegasus. “We can’t stay at the Academy and I doubt we can go home… This is like that book… You know, the one, ninth grade…”

“Catch-22, the only book you actually read all of freshman year,” Arya remembered, laughing. “Yea, we are stuck between a rock and a hard place,

you're right."

"So what do we do?"

"We could go back. We know Sabrina and Madoc will protect us," she suggested.

Xavier shook his head and sat down on the grass, watching the magnificent creatures graze nearby. "They'll meet us wherever we go," Xavier replied, thinking. "We can't keep putting other people at risk, Ya."

"We didn't ask for this," she muttered, sitting next to him and leaning into his shoulder. "This, none of this, is our fault."

"Doesn't mean we aren't responsible if we stay…"

Arya sat up and looked at her brother inquisitively. She'd never heard him so mature and for a moment, she was awestruck by how much he had grown in such a short time. "You're right. But where can we go?"

A few minutes passed without another word as they watched their creatures graze and drink from the pond. The wind rustled the leaves in the trees and the sun felt warm and natural on their faces. It was in that appreciation for the beauty of life Arya realized where they had to go, if they were to keep those they cared for safe.

"Hell. We have to go to Hell, Xavy."

He didn't reply and he didn't move for a few minutes, but then he reluctantly agreed. "You're right. It's the only option."

Helping each other stand, they approached their magical creatures and mounted them once more.

"We'll send for Cliff and Gwen when we know it's safe."

"Are you sure about this, Xavy?" She asked, her voice shaking.

He inhaled deeply, holding his breath a moment before nodding. She took hold of his hippogriff and pulled them closer to herself. "I guess we're on the highway to Hell."

Arya snorted but didn't laugh. "Persephone, please, take me to my Father," she whispered, closing her eyes and leaning into her pegasus. "Take us to Hell."

With a pop, they were gone.

Sneak Peek of Descend

Chapter One

The darkness was so unyielding the Morningstar twins could not see their own fingers dancing in front of their faces, let alone one another. Their breaths turned ragged as their heartbeats became deafening drums in their ears. The silence overwhelmed them. Arya began to panic, her mind flashing back to her captivity at the hands of her vindictive brother, the werewolf king Baan. She nearly lost her mind in the darkness not long ago; her madness a moment away from fruition. Persephone, her pegasus and familiar, started to pace increasing Arya's anxiety as she attempted to control her winged horse. Xavier began to manifest a small glowing white orb in his hands. As it filled with light, Xavier moved his hands apart and threw the orb so it hovered above them.

Although the glowing orb helped ease Arya's fears, it was entirely unhelpful with illuminating their surroundings. Nothing was visible to her. Even the ground seemed an endless black beneath their feet.

"Where are we?" Arya's voice quivered as she whispered to her brother. "This can't be Hell, right? Like, this… this isn't it?" Xavier shrugged, hopping down from Hornbeck, a hippogriff he'd borrowed from the Academy of Night as they'd made their escape. Arya followed as Xavier lead Hornbeck and the orb through the abyss.

“I don’t think so… I… I don’t know… I think…” Xavier stammered, his own dread nearly impossible for him to fight. The twins had fled the academy in fear their Headmistress was a spy for their psychopathic elder sister, the vampire queen Aya. Their intention to teleport to Hell lead to their presence in this pitch black void.

“We should go, Xavy!” Arya whispered, pleading with his back as he peered into the darkness. Just then, they heard a rumble in the distance. Arya grasped Persephone’s reins tightly and turned her pegasus to see the sound. Nothing but a sheet of impenetrable darkness as far as she could see. A strange screech caused Arya to jump. Persephone pinned her ears back. The fear shared between the two felt palpable to Xavier. He turned back, leading his hippogriff closer and placed his hand on Arya’s knee. As an arcane void, he had the power to dampen magic or emotions. While his basic spell casting was far from impressive, his touch alone was powerful and effective enough to calm both the horse and the girl.

“We’ll leave in a minute, Ya. I just want to see what’s here,” he said once he sensed she wasn’t as afraid.

“No! Just get on Hornbeck, Xavy,” she begged in earnest.

Xavier shook his head. Something in him was calling to the corner of the room, where again a startling sound escaped. This time, Xavier thought, it sounded like a growl of some kind. Closing his eyes, he projected himself into the darkness; something he’d never done. When he opened his eyes in his astral form, he still couldn’t see anything. Closing his eyes again, he focused on willing himself the ability to see in the dark. He was pleased when he opened them to reveal a vision of a spectacular beast. It chained in three collars; one for each of its massive lizard-like heads. He held his breath in awe as he carefully walked around the sleeping giant. The wings were at least twice as long as Xavier was tall and they were tucked up inside. The tail, just one, was long with spines sticking out but the heads were all sound asleep. Each slumbering head pointed in a different direction.

Just as he was about to walk back around the dragon, he blinked and fell back into his body. Arya was jerking him by both shoulders, shaking him furiously. He could feel her terror prickling at his skin as it grew.

“XAVY! Where are you?! Come back!” she whispered as loudly as she dared. Her panic reverberated through his body. Without hesitation, he

embraced her in a tight hug, using his power to soothe her at once.

"It's okay, Ya. Just a dragon," he whispered into her ear, still holding her. "I think we're where we meant to be. We just… we just ended up in the wrong part." As her shaking and power eased, he released her. Looking into his sister's deep green eyes, he pulled her flaming red hair out of her face and grinned. "Don't worry! I think we can figure this out."

"Where did you go?" She finally replied, eying him wearily.

"I'm sorry, Ya. I forgot you've never seen me project."

Arya sighed and nodded. "Right," she said. "I forgot you could do that."

"Yea, I was just trying to figure out what made that noise." He laughed softly, patting Hornbeck's neck. "You'll never believe it! There's a dragon here! With three heads!"

Instead of excitement, Arya paled as her knowledge of mythology came to her mind. "A dragon with three heads is a Hydra, Xavier. Probably one of the most dangerous creatures in mythology. One head is cut off and two more grow in its place… they are nearly impossible to kill."

"Wow! Incredible!" He gasped, clearly impressed unlike his sister who was definitely afraid of the monster in the corner.

Arya shook her head. "It would tear you apart, Xavy!!" Sometimes, as close as they were, Arya didn't understand her twin much.

"I guess that explains the three chains and collars on the one dragon thing," he replied. "Still, the coolest thing I've seen. Besides, it was just sleeping. Think we heard it snore and shift since it's asleep."

"Well, I'm glad you were smart enough to project over. I'd hate to have lost you for a dragon's snack," Arya joked feebly.

To his credit, Xavier snorted and spun slowly around. "Now I know we are in Hell because there is no way that thing would be allowed to roam free… So, where is the exit?"

Arya shuddered but said nothing.

The entire room lit up around them at that moment. To their surprise, a moderately heavyset woman with dark gray hair and a heavily lined, tan face was standing on the far side, smiling at them.

"Princess Arya, Prince Xavier," the woman said bowing low. "It is a great honor to meet you. Your father has been expecting you. Please follow me, and do be careful not to wake the dragons."

The twins' eyes adjusted so they were finally able to look around the now dimly lit room and saw at least twenty different dragons chained to the walls and floors of the enormous dungeon. Arya gasped and grabbed onto Xavier's arm, releasing Persephone, who took the opportunity to teleport out; leaving the hippogriff to fend for himself.

"Hurry now!" the woman across the chamber called.

Xavier and Arya walked arm-in-arm across the cobblestone floor as quickly as they could while Hornbeck followed as closely as he could manage. The woman smiled kindly at the twins when they reached her. Closer they could see her eyes were a deep, muted brown and filled with warmth.

"You are certainly lucky we were expecting you, Your Highnesses. Otherwise, I'd have hated to be you both when those dragons woke. They don't have much freedom, but they can get to the center of the room… It is where we drop in goats and griphoppers in for their meals."

"Griphoppers?" Xavier asked.

"Well yes, they're a dragon's healthiest food," the strange woman replied, puzzled at their confusion.

"Yea, but what are they? Also, where are we?" Arya asked, her interest clearly piqued.

"Oh. Think of Earth's sheep but with webbed feet and a long tail." The woman chuckled quietly, closing the large heavy door to the dragon's dungeon. "And you are in the Kingdom of Hell on Titan, of course!"

"And who are you?" Xavier demanded as they followed the woman through the stone corridor. This time the woman let out a sincere laugh and nodded.

"Of course you wouldn't know me! I am Oleander, His Majesty's personal assistant," she said each word with such authority, Arya momentarily entertained the idea that she might outrank them. "I was there at your birth, of course. Along with Madame Bergot."

"Who?" Xavier sounded confused.

"Nancy Bergot? I was told she still served Her Majesty in the mortal realm," Oleander stopped to look at the twins. Arya gasped as she realized who Oleander meant.

"Nana? I mean, Nurse Nancy?" she asked. Their past was starting to make sense.

“Is she still a nurse? Fancy that. One would think the old lass would have retired by now. My, she must be 180 by now!” Oleander explained as she turned away and continued to lead them through the maze of cobblestone hallways.

Xavier and Arya exchanged glances as they hurried after her but beyond their shared twintuition both were apprehensive. They had no real time to process what was happening. Less than an hour had passed since they had fled the academy and now they were trying to take sanctuary in Hell. Although, Arya thought to herself, it wasn’t anything like she’d imagined.

“Where are the people being tortured? Seems awful quiet for Hell,” Xavier said as if reading his sister’s mind. Oleander stopped short again, spinning around her expression contorted with disapproval.

“Prince Xavier Morningstar! How… I… why I never!” The gray haired woman exclaimed.

“He didn’t mean anything. It’s what the mortals believe,” Arya tried to explain. If this woman, whatever she was, knew what most supernaturals knew about the mortal realm, Arya thought it was likely she’d never heard of the human religions. “They believe if a mortal sins enough, they’ll be sent to Hell as a way to pay for their evil behavior… for all eternity.”

“Oh my! How delightfully silly!” Oleander began to laugh deeply.

“So it’s not true then?” Xavier asked again. Oleander pattered him on the arm gently, still laughing merrily. She turned and led them to a massive set of dark oak doors.

“Your father is waiting.” Oleander ushered them forward, nodding to a set of guards in black armor seemed to melt out of the walls to open the doors.

Startled, Arya half-screamed. Then she began to giggle. “What? Where did they come from? I… I didn’t see them.”

“You weren’t meant to, Your Highness,” the older woman replied. “They’re all throughout the castle. Save for the royal bedchambers, of course, but they will be right outside for your security.”

“That’s not creepy at all,” Xavier scoffed. His sarcastic tone went unnoticed by their guide, who had moved into the chamber and was announcing their arrival.

“Your Majesty, may I present your children, the prince and princess Morningstar?” She was heard saying. A short pause was followed by Oleander calling out, “all rise for Prince Xavier and Princess Arya!” Despite their nerves, the twins were curious about what awaited them inside the chamber, entering side-by-side.

As they walked through the massive stone doors, they were astonished to see creatures of all kinds dressed in elegant, distinguished styles. It was obvious those invited to the Court were aware of Lucifer’s vanity with their fine dresses and suits. The twins were, by far, the most underdressed in the room. At the far end of the brilliant red carpet sat their impeccably dressed father in a pure white tuxedo with white wing-tipped shoes. Lucifer’s scarred skin and Xavier’s kind eyes were the only two differences between father and son, aside from their current state of dress.

At the moment, Lucifer’s eyes were tinged red with suppressed rage; a tight, hollow smile fixed upon his face. Arya shivered when she realized they had damaged his pride. They were dressed in dirty school uniforms with dirty black hoodies. Hornbeck was right behind them, squawking occasionally. Arya thought how strange it was she’d never heard a hippogriff squawk until that moment. She made note of how disturbingly loud they were. She rubbed her temples as her head ached from exhaustion.

“Easy, boy!” Xavier whispered to Hornbeck. He bowed to his father as Arya did her best to attempt a curtsey. Her ankles began to shake as their father cleared his throat.

“Rise, my children,” Lucifer commanded to Arya’s relief. The twins stood in unison and the room applauded. Arya glanced around and was shocked by the audience. Some were familiar from her mortal history books while others were strangers. Most looked human though a few had purple and blue skin. Xavier took a step back. He glanced at his sister, who impulsively moved toward her brother.

“Welcome to the Kingdom of Hell and the Shadow Realm Court of Titan!” A strange hooded figure at Lucifer’s lefthand side stepped down from his lifted seat to bow low to the twins. The entire room followed his lead, sinking to the floor.

“Titan?” Arya asked, looking up at Lucifer in his throne. His eyes returned to a more human appearance and he seemed pleased with the reaction to his children.

“Like Jupiter’s moon?” Xavier knew this one. Lucifer’s eyes twinkled with amusement.

“Of course,” the king replied nonchalantly. “Wherever else would the kingdom of Hell be?”

“The bowels of the earth,” Xavier laughed. “Like we were taught as kids.” Lucifer’s eyes flashed red for a second, returning to normal before Xavier could blink.

“Mortals know nothing about the Divine. They just tell themselves stories to make themselves feel better.” The king sighed, obviously bored with the conversation.

“So do mortals go to hell when they die?” Arya somehow found the courage to ask despite her nerves. The crowd had fallen from her mind. She was talking to her father and nothing else mattered.

Lucifer studied her, nodding. “Perhaps. Not all. Some of them figure must figure out my Father’s secrets.” He scoffed as if it was unimportant. “The Shadow Realm is unconcerned with such trivial and mundane worries. After all, we are so much more than mortals could ever dare to dream.” He paused looking to the room, still bowing to the twins. “Rise!”

“Wow,” Xavier snorted.

“That’s awful bigoted of you,” Arya said defiantly. Her words nearly lost the the scuffle of those around them standing. “I prefer to judge people based on their moral and ethical center, not their species.”

“Arya, shhh,” Xavier whispered. Arya didn’t know what inspired her bravery under the scrutiny of her father’s gaze, yet she continued.

“Our mom taught us to appreciate the value of all life.” Sighing, Xavier took his sister’s hand and spoke up.

“We’re sorry if we’re not your picture-perfect kids, pops,” Xavier added, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Mom did her best alone.”

Their pulses raced as the silence seemed to stretch endlessly. No one breathed as the king stood up, stepping down the ten stairs from his throne. He strode the three steps to stand nose to nose with his son. Arya held tightly to her brother’s hand. Together they stood, unshrinking against their father’s furious gaze.

“Oleander,” the king said chillingly, finally breaking the silence. “Take them to their living quarters. Do make sure the prince gets a southern view.”

Within a heartbeat, Oleander was at their side, taking hold of the linked twins, pulling them along with her. After a few strides, they began to walk on their own accord. Arya glanced over her shoulder to see their father climb back onto his throne. A well-dressed figure stepped forward as Lucifer's eyes continued to glow with crimson rage.

"Vassago, I am not…" His voice faded as they left the large throne room. They followed Oleander down yet another long corridor. Halfway, she stopped, clapping her hands. A young blue-skinned boy, maybe ten, appeared. He beamed sweetly at the older woman.

"Yes, Mix Oleander?" The boy waited for instructions calmly without fidgeting. Xavier wondered if he'd ever master the same ability.

"Marios, please greet the prince and princess Morningstar," Oleander said. He bowed low to the ground, popping up a second later. "Take this beast down to see your father. See if he might be able to track down the princess's pegasus. Check the northern valley, where the wild ones roam."

"Yes, Mix Oleander!" Marios replied cheerfully, taking Hornbeck's lead from Xavier's hand. He headed off; the hippogriff squawking all the while.

"What does Mix mean?" Arya finally asked. She'd heard it, although she'd never paid it much attention.

"It's a way to address women in our realm," Oleander said. "Young or old, unless they are known as a Madame. To call a Madame 'Mix' would be quite rude."

Arya didn't understand so she let it go. As soon as the hippogriff and the boy were out of sight, Oleander continued to lead the children down another hallway and up a spiral staircase into a tower. Halfway up, she stopped and smiled to Xavier.

"Your bedchamber, Your Highness," she bowed slightly as he walked past her to enter his new room. Inside was beautifully decorated room with a large four poster bed with black bedding in the center. A matching armoire and dresser off to one side. A small sitting area with three chairs took space on the opposite side.

"I will send someone to fetch you when the king is ready to retire for his evening meal. In the meantime, Chef has prepared you a snack to ease your hunger." Oleander pointed to the table, where a covered plate appeared. Closing the door, Oleander winked conspiratorially at Arya.

“Your brother will learn his lesson after a few days in those chambers,” she whispered, chuckling.

“Learn what exactly?” Arya asked with an air of regality. Arya was growing remarkably confident in her position as a princess, learning to use her voice more. Her kidnapping by Baan had strengthened her in a way she never expected; she was less afraid. When the older woman didn’t answer her question, Arya stopped walking. She folded her arms over her chest defiantly. “Learn what?”

Oleander scoffed, displeased. Realizing she could not force Arya to move, she answered. “Learn not to offend the king. This is Titan.”

“What exactly does that mean?” Arya demanded.

“The king does not like to be spoken back to. He… has ways of punishing you without ever touching you, Princess. You see, your brother has been put in a southern facing room.”

“I don’t know what it means. Explain.” Arya shook her head, throwing her hands up in frustration.

Oleander sighed. “The northern views are majestic. You’ll be enchanted by how the skies dance under Jupiter’s rising and setting… The southern, however… It is where the king keeps the Legions.”

“Legions? Like an army?”

“Of demons and damned, yes.” Oleander nodded.

“Damned?” Arya asked. “Like humans?”

“Mortals who committed great acts of violence or greed in their lives. Mortals who bargain their souls for earthly gains. Those who commit unpardonable sins. Essentially any human who devolved into a lesser being.”

“How do they get here? Do they choose this?” Arya wondered more to herself than to the woman, who answered anyway.

“In a way. The mortals who come to this place to join the legions are here so they will not be imprisoned in purgatory for an eternity. If we win the Battle-To-Come, they will find their place in the kingdom of Heaven alongside our King and his Queen.” Oleander began to walk again as she spoke.

“My parents…” Arya’s voice trailed off in amazement as Oleander moved forward. “Who will lead the Legions?” Arya asked as she slowly

followed the woman up the stairs, her lungs aching from the climb. The air was thinner than she was used to. “Who is their commander?”

“The General Malphas, of course! He greeted you upon your arrival, sitting at the king’s left. He is second only to your father and is superior to the Four Commanders, including Vepar, the Sea Commander, whom you saw earlier at Lucifer’s righthand. ” Arya shook her head. She could remember Malphas but not Vepar.

“Sorry, I don’t remember,” she sighed, rubbing her temples again.

The older woman tisked, stopping at a red door at the top of the tower. Her face split into a cheerful expression as she opened the door to Arya’s new bedroom. “Welcome to your living quarters, Princess.”

The large chamber had a similar four poster bed as in Xavier’s room although her bedding was a deep rich blue. The entire room was decorated in one shade of blue or another. It was stunningly impressive.

“Wow! This is… amazing!” Arya exclaimed to the older woman’s glee.

“Your father designed this room for you in anticipation you would return to our kingdom,” she explained. “He has always wanted you to come home.”

Arya said nothing as she walked to the bed, putting the bag she was still carrying down. She turned slowly, taking in the room with awe.

“Someone will be here soon to help you dress for the evening meal. In the meantime, there is a snack prepared for you on the table, Princess.”

Without another word, the heavyset woman left. She closed the door on her way out. Arya walked around, touching each piece of furniture delicately. There was a small sofa facing a flat mirror that somehow didn’t reflect, a small table with three chairs, two matching armoires, and a dresser. The windows were covered with heavy, deep ocean blue curtains, still closed. Remembering what Oleander said about the view, she pulled them open with a pleased gasp.

The view was every bit as promised. The castle was clearly built at the top of a tall mountain. Everything seemed to fall away into a valley filled with purple and blue coniferous trees. They reminded Arya of evergreens. In the distance, she could see the shimmering water of a small winding river in the valley between two vast mountain ranges. Each peak topped with

snow. An aurora borealis danced in the night sky. It was more colorful and vivid than the northern lights she'd once seen on earth.

Arya moved to the French doors, opening out to a balcony. She stepped outside. The cool breeze on her skin felt refreshing. She took a deep breath, letting the day wash over her. After a few minutes, her skin filled with goosebumps. Taking one last look at the moon's glorious view, she walked inside. She left the door cracked to let the air flow into her room. Kicking off her shoes, she crawled between the silk sheets. She was too tired to care about the dirt on her clothes, and she was asleep before she could think about anything else.

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